# THE GIRL OF THE LAZY L

GARY MARSHALL





a circle



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## *Adventure in the West*

WHEN young Miss Leighton came back from San Francisco to her wealthy father's ranch, the Lazy L, she caused a considerable sensation. Her smart city clothes did not look exactly proper for horse-back work, but she certainly lassoed a good many cowboy hearts. Rich, pretty, and as headstrong as an unbroken colt, she was perfect kidnapper's prey, and when she became the prisoner of a gang of ruthless outlaws the six-shooters began to blaze with a vengeance. *The Girl of the Lazy L* is full of good, strong, dramatic action and excitement.

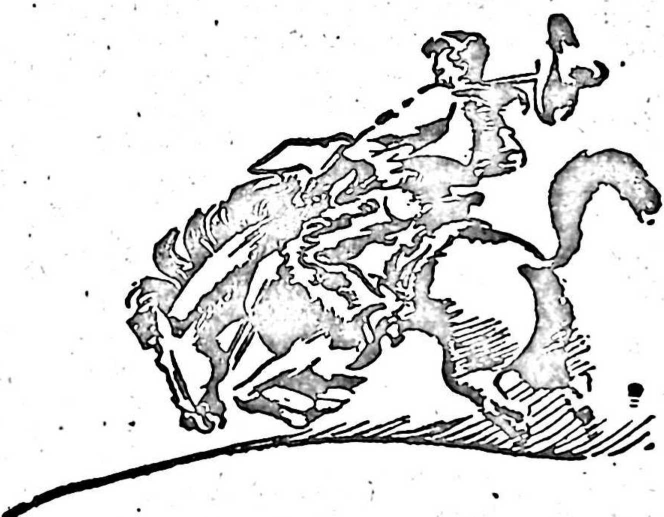
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GARY MARSHALL





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# CHAPTER ONE

As was the custom during the summer months the fifty-mile run from Aravaca was made at night in order that the heat of the semi-desert might be lessened. The first sun of a July day was gilding the crests of the black cliffs west of Mesa Prieta when Bill Dennison, with a flourish of long lash over tired horses, swung the heavy coach around and stopped it in front of the one hotel in the village.

A tenderfoot would have said Dennison's finish was incompatible with the number of passengers he carried, but the grisled, lanky driver always ended his trips in this melodramatic fashion. He emptied his mouth of a cud of tobacco, saying as he spat:

"Now you just wait a minute and I'll help you down."

The passenger was upon the worn board walk before Dennison could climb stiffly down over the right front wheel. She was a moderately tall girl of twenty, neither slender nor plump. There was disappointment, perhaps a little anger on her pretty face. She brushed a hurried hand over the auburn hair that showed below her small hat, as if she were impatient at its being coated with desert dust. She shook the skirt of the linen duster that protected her blue dress.

"Well, howdy, Lida!" called Sam Minton, owner and proprietor of the hotel as he shuffled towards the street. "So you're back, are you?"

Lida Leighton conceded a smile to the old man who was now appraising her critically. He wagged his head.

"Well, durned if I see them six months in San Francisco's done you any harm, 'cept to make you prettier. Durned if you ain't plumb good lookin', Lida. Have a nice time?"

"Oh yes!" she answered.

"Glad to be back on the home range?" Minton persisted hospitably.

"Yes, I'm very glad," she answered a trifle impatiently. She glanced about, and seemed not pleased with the smal crowd gathering from three directions to see if there was any mail. Nine out of ten never got mail, but they had little to do in the drab border town except rise early and meet the stage.

A crease formed down the girl's smooth forehead which was filmed with dust. She looked at the grinning old man. He was tugging at his snowy beard as if this were the only manner in which he could express his appreciation of the returned girl.

"Why isn't there somebody here from the Lazy L?" she demanded, as if he were to blame for this lack.

"Dunno."

"But——" Even before she had left to spend half a year with an aunt in San Francisco she had been a little imperious.

Minton inquired whether she had expected somebody to meet her from her father's ranch.

"Why, of course!"

"Let 'em know you was comin' to-day, Lida?"

She did not answer this. Minton jerked at his long whiskers again.

"Your pa was in here—lemme see—it was six days ago, and he tells me you won't be back till Wednesday of next week, Lida."

She admitted reluctantly that she had planned to reach Mesa Prieta on that date but that she had changed her mind and come sooner.

After setting her handbags on the walk, Dennison loosed the straps of the rear boot and grunted as he eased a large trunk to the ground. He had already noted that it was a new trunk, and heavy.

"What in tarnation you got in this thing?" he growled. "She's as big as one of them box-cars on the railroad at Aravaca."

She gave him a look but no reply, unless her slightly curling lip could have been considered a reply. Turning back to Minton, she saw he now had a valise in each hand.

"I reckon you'll be stayin' here till word can be sent out to the Lazy L for somebody to come and get you, Lida."

"Indeed I won't!" she answered. "Spend two days in this awful town?"

"Well," drawled Minton, "I 'low she ain't as big as 'Frisco, but she's the best we got, Lida."

Lida Leighton followed the old man into the office, where the floor bore many dark stains, the majority of them from tobacco-juice spat at sand boxes with poor aim, though two or three had been left there by blood that had not been completely removed. The girl's small, straight nose turned

up a little as she noted these familiar stains. Yes, the one that roughly resembled the map of Italy was still there. Why in the world didn't old man Minton make his Mexican moxas scrub this floor and scrub it well?

Several townsmen had now grouped about the stage-driver.

"By gosh!" Dennison growled. "If that there box-car of hern is filled with finery, it's sure packed durned tight."

"Wal," ventured old Ike Aldrich after he had sized up the trunk, "it shore cain't packed on no ordinary jackass."

"Nor on two ordinary jackasses," Dennison amended. "I sure bet she made Joe Leighton's money fly right and left when she was in 'Frisco."

"Well, Joe's got enough left," grunted another man.

Ike Aldrich was craning his long red neck to get a better view of the girl who now stood in front of the paintless and whittled counter, while Minton was behind it.

"High-toned as hell, ain't she?" Aldrich queried.

"Sorter snooty," conceded the driver. "But up and down and crossways, maybe she ain't so bad."

"I figgered," put in Andy Lattimer, "as how Joe Leighton and his wife, they sends Lida up to San Francisco to marry her off to some rich man."

"Huh!" snorted Aldrich. "Who tells you that?"

"Aw, just heard it," said Lattimer.

"Well, there ain't no truth to it!" declared Dennison. "Whichever way you take Lida and no matter how she acks, she's still a cowgirl."

"She sure don't look it now," grunted Aldrich.

"Look it?" snickered Lattimer. "She looks a heap more like one of them preemy-donners. I gotta admit though that she looks good in fine clothes and she's got a way about her, like a thoroughbred filly as keeps her head in the air." He wagged his head sagely. "There ain't a man in this here part of the country that'd stand a chance with her, now she ain't brought back a husband from the coast."

Aldrich puckered his leathery face as if he were endeavouring to visualize all the male inhabitants of the region. He grinned tentatively.

"Dunno about that," he disagreed, "how about that young feller as rides in here the day before yistiday?.

"Him?" ejaculated Lattimer. "He's a outsider!"

"He knows how to set a saddle and tote a gun just the same."

As the two argued over the attributes of the newcomer Minton faced the girl across the counter in the lobby where the heat of the day was already promising to be felt.

"But there ain't a rig in town as'd haul that there trunk of yourn, Lida," declared the hotelman.

She said she would leave the trunk and let a rig come from the ranch for it.

"You ain't figurin' on walkin' home, are you, Lida?"

She regarded him soberly, as if wanting to decide whether he were trying to be humorous. It was twenty miles to the Lazy L by the most direct route, thirty by the rough wagon road.

"You best stay here," he insisted, "till we can send a feller out to the ranch with the news that you got in ahead of time. I can get a Mex to make the trip for a peso or so."

"No, I don't want to wait and send for a rig," she declared positively. "I'm going to hire a saddle horse and ride out to the ranch. It won't be the first time I've done it."

Striving for reasons that would dissuade her, Minton reminded her that she had been away from home for six months and would be soft and unaccustomed to the saddle.

"You'll be most turrible sore by the time you reach the Lazy L, Lida."

"Well, it won't be the first time in my life I've been saddle sore," she replied a little impatiently. "Will you hire a horse for me, Mr. Minton, or do I have to do it myself? I must get this dust off and change my clothes." She had unbuttoned the duster and now the old man leaned across the counter to appraise her more keenly. He grinned and wagged his head.

"Them there duds ain't exactly proper for hossback work, but that shore is a purty dress, Lida, and becomin' to you, too."

Colour flashed to her cheeks and softness to her eyes for a moment before she said:

"Will you get a horse for me, or must I go out and do it?"

"Yeah, yeah, I can get you a hoss," the old man agreed, "but—but Lida——"

"But what?" she prompted somewhat imperiously. "Surely I haven't forgotten to ride while I've been away. I can bathe and change and eat breakfast and be ready in an hour."

The old man grimaced and lifted his hoary brows as if both amused and embarrassed.

"Where you goin' to bathe, Lida?"

Angry embarrassment heightened her colour, but she tossed her head, from which she had removed the expensive blue hat.

"Never mind about the bath!" she flashed. "I had forgotten there were no bathtubs in Mesa Prieta."

"Gotta get me one for this hotel! Just gotta get me one!" declared Minton. Then his faded eyes filled with concern. "You figurin' on takin' the trail from here to the Lazy L?"

"Of course. Why should I ride an extra ten miles?"

"Because——" The old man stroked his whiskers and glanced towards the doorway where several men were looking in.

Lida Leighton turned in the same direction but lifted her chin haughtily as she turned back.

"Why should I be so interesting?" she asked. "Those men—most of them have seen me scores of times, and now they seem to think I'm some sort of curiosity from the way they act!"

"They're lookin' at you," Minton said with an old man's candour, "because you're so durned purty, Lida. They just can't help it."

Though the pink of pleasure came to her cheeks again, she turned her back squarely upon the curious onlookers just outside the doorway. She smiled now, but even her smile bore a touch of the imperious.

"Is there any reason why I should not ride the trail?" she queried.

Minton pondered, but she interrupted his meditations——

"I won't stay here till word can be sent to the ranch! I don't see why someone wasn't here with a buckboard to meet me."

Leaning towards her as if his words must not reach those outside the door, Minton explained that since she had left Mesa Prieta a small band of cattle rustlers and all-round outlaws had come into the country, making the town its rendezvous.

"Goodness, I don't see where that matters," Lida said. "My father owns the Lazy L."

"Which is just the hitch," said the old man. "These here outlaws—they're headed by a feller as calls hisself Jack Kirk—they don't know you're back, but they're supposed to be operatin' between town and the Lazy L basin."

The girl's violet eyes darkened until they were almost black.

"Are they stealing Lazy L cattle?" she demanded as her red lips momentarily straightened.

Having started his side of what he meant to be a persuasive argument, Minton explained that not only were the outlaws stealing cattle where they could find them, but were at this moment supposed to be out along the trail that led to the ranch.

"But do you know they are in that direction?" she demanded, stubbornly unwilling to be convinced.

Minton explained that this was the information that had come to him from men who were supposed to know. He added that the rustlers were openly supplying "Dutch" Bruenor, the local butcher, with dressed meat which might have borne any one of a half-dozen brands. Lida's lips curled.

"They must be a cheap outfit, Mr. Minton! They certainly must be, if that's the way they work, selling dressed meat. Goodness, you almost had me thinking they rustled cattle by the hundreds and hazed them across the line."

"Now you looky here, gal, don't you rope the idee that these here newcomers is cheap! There's four of them, and——"

"Only four?" she interrupted, and laughed scornfully. "I thought from the way you talked there must be at least four dozen!"

"Four of 'em," resumed the old man, his face almost tearful with concern, "and they're four as hard-lookin' hombres as ever drunk whisky and toted guns, Lida. Now you stay right here till we can send Ramon Ortego to the ranch with news of how you showed up ahead of time."

Again the girl's lips straightened and her eyes became almost black. She wiped an impatient hand across one temple as if to silence a wisp of auburn hair that would disagree.

"Will you attend to getting a saddle horse for me, Mr. Minton?" she demanded. "Or do I have to waste time in looking for one myself?"

## CHAPTER TWO

MINTON knew the extent of the development of outlawry during the time. Lida had been away, and was seriously concerned about her. He was also aware of her stubborn, high-spirited nature and her desire to do as she pleased. To him it was evident she was angry now because somebody from the Lazy L had not met her upon her arrival in Mesa Prieta.

"Durn it," he told himself, "somethin' oughta happen to take this high-headedness out of her. If it wasn't for the danger of her bein' really harmed I'd let her have her own way about this. She'll have it anyhow."

He told her he could get somebody to accompany her if she was determined to ride out to the ranch.

"I'm quite capable of making the trip alone!" she retorted. "Will you please get me a horse!"

"But looky here, Lida! This here gang of outlaws is maybe worse'n you figger."

She gave him an impatient smile.

"I don't care that about them!" She snapped her fingers. "Do you think I am still a child?"

"You ain't" replied the old man, "got a whale of a lot of years to your credit, but if you get more bullheaded as you get older——"

Lida denied that she was stubborn.

"Didn't say you was. Said you was bullheaded."

"Very well. I merely know what I want, sir!"

"And want it when you want it! Aw right, I'll get you a hoss if you're set on makin' the fool trip. But don't say I didn't warn you."

She assured him it was not a dangerous ride. She had made it time after time.

"When there wasn't no gang of outlaws in this here region, Lida."

"There have been outlaws and cattle thieves as long as I can remember. These mal hombres haven't killed anybody, have they?"

Minton had to admit they had not, but added that Jack Kirk and his confederates were bad just the same.

"But they won't know who I am if they do see me," Lida argued.

"I ain't so durned sure of that, gal. They savvy you been away, and they know you're expected back. You know how talk spreads here."

She smiled but lifted her chin.

"I don't see that I should be of interest to outlaws even if they are bad."

"There's just the point. As you'll be headin' for the Lazy L they'll likely suspect right off as how you are Joe Leighton's gal, and Joe's about the richest rancher in this kentry."

"Yes, I know that."

Minton was about to give up his argument and call to Ike Aldrich to get her a saddle horse when he saw Lida turn at the sound of steps on the stairway. Looking that way he saw a man coming down and immediately had what seemed an inspired thought.

Though she prided herself on her poise, Lida Leighton stared at this man. He was tall but not slender, for about his well-shaped body and limbs was the suggestion of much potential strength. She saw in a flash that he wore grey trousers, the bottoms of which were over polished high-heeled boots, that his shirt was tan and clean, his tie blue, that he carried a good Stetson in his left hand, as if he wanted the morning air upon his shapely blond head. She saw also that his features were regular and strong, that his face was so deeply tanned that it contrasted strangely with the steely grey of his eyes.

It was evident that he was surprised at seeing her here, where the prettiest girls were Mexican señoritas. She tried to keep from colouring, and quickly averted her eyes as proof that she was not interested in strange young men in Mesa Prieta even though they were very good looking.

As she turned and looked across the little counter she estimated that he was about twenty-five years of age, and wondered why he wore a cartridge belt and holstered revolver with his well-fitting clothes. Though she trembled inwardly with fear that what she was going to do might be construed as bucolic, she could not resist leaning over the counter.

"Is that Jack Kirk?" She whispered. "The man you said was leader of the outlaws?"

"Him?" snorted Minton, though he knew little indeed about the young man who had been here less than forty-eight hours. "'Course not! Say, he's just the feller we want, Lida!"

"For what?" she whispered.

"Why, to ride home with you," he declared, and before Lida could answer he raised his voice and called: "Hey, Mr. Orton! Come here a minute! Can you spare the time?"

With all the impassivity he could command Bob Orton turned from where he had started to join the crowd outside. He smiled, bowed, and came towards the girl, who now stood with downcast eyes.

"I have more time this morning than anything else," he said in a slow voice that seemed to hold a trace of amusement.

Lida lifted her head, and saw that he was smiling. Innate antagonism took possession of her.

"This here's Lida Leighton," said the hotelkeeper. "Her father owns the Lazy L acrost the hills to east. Lida, this here's Bob Orton."

"How do you do, Mr. Orton?" Lida said with formality she had learned during the past half-year. Before she had left for San Francisco she would have said "Howdy."

"I'm fair to middlin', I reckon," Orton drawled, and his eyes twinkled as he appraised her. "This is quite a surprise. Ma'am, is there anything I can do to be of service to you?"

Minton had had his doubts yesterday as to the business of the newcomer here, but now he was sure Orton was all right, which meant that he was to be trusted, and that any girl, no matter how young and pretty, would be safe in his care.

"I really don't believe there is," said Lida. "It was kind of you to offer though."

"There's where you're plumb wrong!" Minton blurted as he looked at the girl. Then he turned to the man. "Are you doin' anything special to-day, Mr. Orton?"

"If I had as much money as I have time to spare, Mr. Minton, I'd be rich."

Lida flashed the old man an admonitory look, to which he paid no attention, but went on enthusiastically:

"Just the feller we want to-day, Orton! We was a-lookin' for somebody to ride acrost the hills with Lida. You willin' to go?"

"Nothing would suit me better, sir," said Orton as he smiled at the girl.

Minton was beginning to explain his fears for Lida provided she made the ride alone when Orton said:

"I have heard talk about Kirk and his gang, sir. Likely it would be better if someone rode with Miss Leighton, seeing as Kirk and his outlaws are supposed to be away to eastward."

Lida was now biting at her lower lip to choke back hot, angry words. She managed a sort of smile and fought to retain her poise as she said:

"This is really very kind of you, Mr. Orton, but I shall be quite safe. Mr. Minton seems to think I am a tenderfoot, though the fact is I know every foot of the country between here and the Lazy L basin."

"Nobody's sayin' you don't know the trail," the hotelman interrupted, "but that ain't the point. What'll you do if you run slap-bang into that outfit of rustlers, Lida?"

"I'll just ride right on past them," she replied, chin up. Then her colour was gone and her eyes were nearly black. "No, I won't! If I find they are stealing Lazy L stock I'll stop and do a little talking to them!"

"Best do a little shootin' first," suggested Minton grimly, and felt his argument was lost.

Because Bob Orton did not reiterate his willingness to go with her, she murmured angrily back of her pretty teeth:

"Now I won't let him even if he gets down on his knees and begs."

She had already decided that here was a man who would not beg for anything. She was surprised and somewhat confused when Orton said he felt certain she would be entirely safe, since she knew the trail through the rough country intimately.

"Of course I'll be safe," she assured him, for she did not want him to see that she was disappointed.

"But may I offer a suggestion, Miss Leighton?"

"Of course, but really I don't want to put you to the trouble of going with me, Mr. Orton. I would feel like the child Mr. Minton seems to think I am if I had to have a bodyguard on the trip from here to the Lazy L. What is it?"

"You know how to handle a six-shooter?"

"Certainly," she said and flashed him a smile.

"Then carry one."

She started to frown in resentment of this advice, but realized she had no cause to affront this man. She said she did not have a pistol.

"Then may I lend you one? I have another fortyfour Colt upstairs."

"Thank you," said Lida, "but I need a new pistol anyway." She smiled at him now, though she put only half warmth into her eyes and lips. She fumbled with the catch of her purse. "You can do something for me, Mr. Orton, if you will. Could you buy me a pistol? Jenkins, down the street, is open I believe."

Without removing his look from her he took the two gold pieces.

"Thirty-eight forty?"

"Why, yes," she agreed. "That will be about right. And one with a six-inch barrel, if you please."

She interpreted his look as belief that she knew weapons, and flushed a little with secret pleasure.

"Belt, holster and shells, Miss Leighton?"

"Yes, if you will be so kind. I'm afraid this is a great deal of trouble for you."

He assured her that it would be no trouble, and turned towards the doorway as if his thoughts were entirely on buying the revolver. Wanting to call him back and give further and more explicit orders, if only to prove that she knew her own mind, Lida bit at her lip and kept silent. She turned to the hotelman.

"Will you take my valises upstairs, Mr. Minton? I have wasted nearly half an hour, and it's going to be a hot day."

Knowing the futility of further argument, the old man carried her bags up the stairs. She climbed lightly after him.

"I don't see why somebody from the ranch wasn't here to meet me!" she said petulantly as he showed her to an already hot and stuffy room that made the tip of her nose turn up a little. The old man did not reply, but when he was shambling down the stairs he gave vent to his emotions:

"Drat durn her! How'd she expect somebody to be here from the ranch when she done sent 'em word she wouldn't be here till the middle of next week? She's smart, and she ain't got no sense a-tall!" He continued to mutter as he made his way towards the front door. "Well, maybe

she'll have her way and maybe she won't. Leighton'd never forgive me if I let somethin' happen to her. Durned if he would."

Angry enough to explode into profanity, but cunning nevertheless, Minton joined the crowd on the walk.

"Ike," he told Aldrich, "you amble down to Steadman's and get Lida that sorrel pony. Get a good saddle and bridle, too, and spurs. Give you breakfast if you'll 'tend to that for her."

The leathery-faced old rider bow-legged it away, grateful for the promise of a meal for which he would not have to pay. Three days ago he had ridden in from the Rafter G with a hundred dollars in his pockets and a determination to prove that he was among the best of poker players.

As the remainder of the crowd continued to talk about Lida Leighton the hotelkeeper listened until he saw Orton coming along the street with a paper-wrapped parcel under his left arm.

"Somehow," the old man mused, "that feller wears his firearms like he was sorter used to 'em."

"Say, Minton," asked Lattimer, "is that jasper goin' along with her to the ranch?"

"Naw, he ain't!" Minton snarled. "She's a-goin' all alone by herself!"

Almost to a man the crowd declared that Lida was planning a risky ride.

"Well, let 'er go!" Minton grunted. "She's that big-headed since she come back there ain't no arguin' with her a-tall."

"Big-headed?" drawled Lattimer. "She was plenty that away before she went down to 'Frisco."

"Want to talk with you, stranger," Minton said as he caught Bob Orton's arm.

As they re-entered the lobby they saw Lida, pretty and radiant, at the head of the short stairway.

"Oh, Mr. Minton!" she called sweetly. "Will you please bring up my trunk? I must have some things out of it."

"Huh" snorted the old man. "Huh? Me lug that durned box-car upstairs? Say, I'm gettin' old and weak in the knees, even if there was a time when I toted a grand pianner all by myself."

"Then have somebody carry it up, please," she called

down. "It really isn't so heavy. And I must have some things out of it."

"Heavy?" Minton disagreed. "The durned thing weighs half a ton, that's all. Aw, all right, I'll get a couple of greasers to tote it up, but you'll have to pay 'em for doin' it."

At the head of the stairs Lida paled with the realization that the man who called himself Bob Orton could have offered to bring up her trunk but had not.

"I suppose he's afraid he'll soil his shirt!" she mused contemptuously, then remembered that Orton had already done her a favour. She smiled warmly.

"I see you have my guns and things, Mr. Orton," she called. "You may leave the change with Mr. Minton—if there is any."

She did not see Bob Orton's bent smile, but she heard him say:

"Bueno, I'll do that, Miss Leighton."

A few minutes after she had disappeared Minton came in from the street, profanely giving orders to two Mexicans who were making hard and noisy work of carrying the bulky trunk so they would be certain of earning two reales.

"You wait there, Orton!" the old man ordered as he came opposite the newcomer to Mesa Prieta. "I want to make talk with you. Drat her, I reckon all she wants that durned box-car fer is to get a pair of silk stockin's to wear on that brushy trail."

## CHAPTER THREE

Bob Orton's thoughts were pleasant as he waited. Lida Leighton was more than a pretty girl. She was striking. He had known her for a very brief time, but it had been long enough to discover she was headstrong, perhaps spoiled, the sort of girl who might take a tangent, because of too strong a will, and then fight hard to get back to the main road.

He smiled whimsically as he recalled how she had refused to let a man ride with her to the Lazy L. After all, there was nothing very unusual in such refusal. Still, Kirk and his rustlers were out somewhere, and the ride might involve risks.

Minton came downstairs grumbling and swearing.

"What did she want from the trunk?" Orton inquired.

"Huh? How the devil do I know? She wouldn't let me see her open it. Likely a new pair of britches. You et yet?"

"I was waiting for you," said Orton. "Is breakfast ready?"

"If it ain't there's goin' to be a row!" snorted Minton as he ambled towards the dining-room. He did not stop there, but went to the kitchen where he bawled orders at the cook.

"Figgered you'd want some of them fresh ham and eggs," he grunted as he came back and slumped into a chair. "Stage fetched 'em in just now."

"Fresh eggs must be quite a rarity here," ventured Orton.

"They are, 'less you hold your hands under the hens," agreed Minton. "This here heat raises hell with fresh eggs. If they ain't et inside a day they start turnin' into young friers. Ever et an egg with feathers sproutin' on it, Orton?"

Orton smiled, grimaced, shook his blond head.

"Well, I have!" declared the old man. "I've et 'em when they could pick up corn—but grub was scarce. Durn that girl, if she had any sense she'd stay here like I want her to. She knows she orter wait for a rig to come for her from her pa's ranch. Trouble with her is she don't think this place is high-toned enough for her after she's been down to 'Frisco. Joe Leighton, he spiles that girl worse'n a hen's eggs that's laid in the sun for a week. That's a fack. It's Joe's only fault."

"Case of too much money, eh?"

"Sure!" snorted Minton. "But I dunno after all. Lida, she don't care for money except to wear pretty clothes. Shucks, she's purty enough in a calico dress. Say, Orton, I'll be durned if I'm going to let her have her way all through. Joe Leighton'd never forgive me if I let somethin' harm her. I want to talk to you!"

"I'm listening."

Hoary beard wagging, eyes squinted with cunning determination, the old man leaned across the table as he talked. "You'll do it?" he demanded, after he had explained his plan.

"If you think she'll be in real danger."

"Danger?" Minton exploded. "say, I savvy men like this here Kirk and his hellions! They're in this country to clean up a stake, and if they think gittin' Lida and holdin' her will mean money they'll sure capture her, Orton!"

"You mean kidnap her?"

"Call it that if you want to. If they once set eyes on her they'll grab the idea of who she is. Joe Leighton'd pay fifty thousand dollars to get that girl back safe and sound."

Bob Orton was doing some sober thinking. It seemed impossible that the girl could not ride to the Lazy L in safety, yet there might be some foundation for the old man's worries. If Lida were to fall into the hands of the outlaws, would they return her safe to her father even if he did pay a big ransom?

After an impatient look towards the kitchen Minton went into details, ending:

"Well, what about it? I'll pay you fifty dollars if you'll do it, Orton."

The old man's eyes lost their squint as Bob jingled gold pieces in a pocket.

"You ain't broke? Them fifty pesos don't appeal to you?"

Orton replied that if he undertook the job he would not expect pay. Minton's eyes narrowed again.

"Say, what's your business?"

"I punch cows."

"Sounds more like you owned 'em!" snorted the old man. "That listens like real dinero. You make a killin' somewhere?"

"I won a few dollars at faro the other night," drawled Orton. "Now let's get down to brass tacks. Just what is it you want me to do? Maybe I won't be able to do it."

"If you won't then you ain't half the man I think you are! Now listen close!"

The old man had detailed his plan and roughly described the region to eastward when the cook arrived, arms stacked high with dishes. He set them noisily upon the table, returned to the kitchen for coffee. By this time Orton had raked his fried eggs to the edge of his plate. Not so with Minton. He had but one left.

"What's wrong?" he demanded. "Why ain't you eatin' them eggs? They're fresh."

"They are," corrected Orton, "just getting ready to sprout pinfeathers. It was a shame to stop that growth."

He prodded the yolk of one of the eggs with his fork. "Now take this one, for instance. I'll bet a dollar against a Mexican real it would have been a gamecock if it hadn't been disturbed for a few days. The other one would have been a nice tender pullet."

Minton gulped his remaining egg along with a bite of ham.

"You a-tellin' me them eggs ain't fresh? Why, they just arrived by this mornin's stage, man!"

"Not from the hen," drawled Orton. "They must have had a stopover ticket and used it to the limit."

Minton indignantly scraped Orton's eggs on to his own plate. He bent and sniffed, then hacked the eggs up with knife and fork, ate them hurriedly.

"One of 'em was just a mite tainted."

"That was grandma," Orton explained soberly.

"Grammaw? What you mean?"

Bob Orton was suddenly too amazed to answer. Minton jerked his head about to follow the younger man's look. His jaw slackened, revealing yellowed teeth.

"My Gawd!" the old man muttered as if he could not believe his eyes. "Is that what you wanted outen that box-car trunk?"

"Well, I had to have something appropriate to wear," Lida said as she slowly approached.

"Where's you git that rig?" Minton demanded.

"In San Francisco," she replied as she stopped just far enough from the table for Bob Orton to see her patent-leather riding-boots, the extreme uppers of which were just hidden by the hem of an applegreen riding-skirt. The jacket was of the same green, trimmed with gold braid and buttons. Her blouse was white silk, but it got the right touch of colour from a green and white scarf thrown negligently over her left shoulder. A green feather stuck at a jaunty angle from the brim of her small new Stetson sombrero.

"Don't you like it, Mr. Minton?" she asked, as if studiously ignoring the younger man.

"Dunno! Dunno!" Minton muttered. "Yeah, it'd look fine on some purty Mex girl, I reckon. Yeah, it would."

Lida's eyes took on a look of hurt as she turned them in Bob Orton's direction, and he found it impossible to continue to look uninterested.

"That's his taste for you," she laughed doubtfully. "Don't you like it, Mr. Orton?"

Minton was now smacking his lips, rubbing tongue over teeth.

"It does taste jest a mite tainted," he muttered absently, for he was dazed by the girl's beauty and the harmony of colours she wore. "Yeah, it does."

"It does not!" she cried. "This is the first time I have worn it. I didn't have a chance to wear it in the city."

"He refers to chickens, very young chickens," explained Orton soberly.

"I don't neither!" Minton exploded. "I refers to eggs."

"He just ate grandma," Orton went in, ignoring the interruption.

The girl laughed merrily. "He wouldn't notice it," she said as the ends of her lips quirked. "I don't think he has any sense of taste."

"I have too!" Minton snorted. "I got the best taste for hard likker in all Arizony, and I can smell a polecat a mile off when the wind's right. It's the fault of that durned storekeeper in Aravaca! I writ him to send me special fresh eggs! He went and cold-decked me!"

"That was grandma," Lida offered seriously.

As if she and her mirth were too much for him, Minton grabbed half a biscuit and angrily mopped his plate with it. He gulped it down.

"The ham is good," Orton ventured without a smile. "I can recommend it as no older than the first generation."

Lida had replaced the coating of desert dust with a film of powder, and now under it a light flush played as she tried to discover a twinkle in Bob Orton's grey eyes. "Do you really like it?" she inquired.

"The ham."

"No—my outfit, Mr. Orton."

Bob appraised her again, from the toes of her black boots to the colourful hair under the brim of the new felt hat. His eyes steadied upon hers.

"If I had selected it for you I would have picked just that," he declared.

Her lips parted, and the colour of her glowing eyes reminded him of violets with the dew still upon them.

"Really? You would?"

"Sure thing! I can't find a single fault with it, Miss Leighton."

"Thank you," she smiled, then her smile turned to irony as she swung towards the gaping old man. "There, Mr, Minton! There's a man with taste!"

"Hell!" Minton grunted, exasperated because she insisted on riding to the Lazy L, and still more exasperated because she was going to wear the gorgeous outfit on that ride. "It don't need a man with taste to tell that last egg was a mite tained."

"It's a shame you treated grandma that way," Lida accused. "I'll take ham, thank you."

"Then go git it!" growled Minton. "I ain't runnin' errands for you no matter how durned purty you are, Lida."

Her chin lifted, and again her eyes were almost black.

"See if I can't!" she challenged. Walking slowly towards the greasy door of the kitchen, she swung her supple hips just enough to make the hem of the short green skirt swish perceptibly. Minton found it impossible to devote any attention to the remainder of his breakfast. He twisted about, gaped.

"My gosh, ain't she purty?" he whispered. "And that rig sets her off proper! But the man she marries will sure have himself plenty trouble!" As if he must have corroboration of this statement, he turned back. "Don't you think so, Mr. Orton? Don't you think the feller as is fool enough to marry her will be buyin' hisself a heap of trouble?"

"I'm sure of it," Orton answered, but his eyes were upon the girl who, framed in the drab doorway to the kitchen, was telling the swarthy Mexican cook what she wanted for breakfast.

Minton tried to elevate his pudgy, reddish nose as he had seen Lida lift her small straight one.

"Huh!" he grumbled. "You'd think she was givin' orders in one of them durned high-toned restaurants in 'Frisco and orderin' her some frog legs with fried eggs on the side."

"Fresh eggs," drawled Orton.

"Yeah, yeah," the old man muttered absently, for he was still thinking about the girl's beauty. "Yeah, fresh eggs."

Orton, who had risen when she had come in, was holding her chair for her when she returned. She seemed demure now and a little surprised and much pleased at this show of

gallantry. He moved the old chair closer to the table as she sat down. She looked up with inquiry in her eyes. "Aren't you going to finish your breakfast, Mr. Orton?"

"Thank you," he answered, "but I have finished. I must go now, if you'll pardon me."

The pout that came to her lips was to Bob Orton proof enough that she did not appreciate denial of her wishes, but he did not suspect that she wanted to open those lips and order him to ride to the Lazy L ranch with her. In a moment she was smiling agreeably.

"I had forgotten you might have important work to do," she said. "Don't let me detain you."

"He's got durned important work to do!" grunted Minton.

She offered Orton her hand.

"Good-bye, sir. It has been pleasant meeting you. I suppose we shall not meet agian."

"Not likely," agreed Bob as he bowed a little over her hand.

"Where is he going?" she asked the old man as the door swung shut after Bob Orton.

"Huh? Where's he goin'? Why down toward the border, of course. Told me last night he had business that way, Lida."

## CHAPTER FOUR

JURD NASON's big bones had once been panoplied with hard muscles to the point of burliness. Now, as he faced the doctor, he was gaunt and emaciated, yet a spark of savage and indomitable fire still burned in his deep-set black eyes.

For forty years Nason had been a cattle rancher, though at odd times a cattle thief. He had often boasted of the fights in which he had whipped six men of his own size, and he had told the truth. Now the skin that stretched tightly over his high cheekbones was bluish in hue and the cheekbones themselves looked more than ever like those of an Indian. His cheeks were hollow, as if the lack of teeth had sucked them inward. The same bluish skin covered his prognathous jaw which of itself told of his stubborn will and his scant faculty for forgiving and forgetting.

"I'll be damned if I believe you, Doc!" he declared as he laid a blue-veined, horny hand upon the table before him.

"In that case," said the old doctor, "you'll have to wait and see."

Jurd Nason's features contorted, but the taut skin of his face made him look savage and grotesque.

"You say I'll be dead inside a year?" he growled.

"You won't live a year, Jurd,"

Now it was as if the blow had really struck the old rancher. His big frame shrank in the chair and a pathetic look came into his eyes. His bluish, tobacco-stained lips twitched.

"What's wrong with me, Doc?"

"It wouldn't help if I told you," returned the frontier surgeon. "Your whole insides are out of kilter, Jurd."

"All of 'em?" demanded Nason. Though he did not fear death, he was reluctant to die until one job was finished.

"Enough of them wrong to kill you within six months, Jurd. You are a plain, outspoken man, and I had as well tell you the truth."

"Yeah," Nason accepted, and got laboriously to his feet. Once upon them he made a pathetic effort to rush blood to his parchment face. "Gimme six months, Doc."

The doctor studied him.

"If you'll follow my directions and quit eating beans and cornbread and fried hog meat you'll last out the six months."

"I got to quit likker too?"

"Well, no," the doctor answered after a few meditative moments. As the old man was going to die anyway he had as well have the satisfaction of his home-made whisky. He had been accustomed to it almost all his life. "Whisky in moderation won't do you any more harm than it's done already, Jurd."

Jurd Nason, wearing the suit that had been his best for fifteen years, shuffled towards the door. He stopped, turned.

"Send you in a couple of beef hides next time anybody comes to town," he said, "That ought to be enough pay for tellin' me I'm goin' to cash in, eh?"

Dr. Bragg said there would be no fee, adding that he had attended Nason and his family for years.

"Yeah, and allus got paid for it, too!" Jurd cackled. "I paid you even when sometimes I had to go out and steal a critter to do it. Allus believe in payin' my bills, Doc."

The doctor smiled. He knew well enough that Jurd stole to pay bills, and because he paid his bills, even in this manner, he believed he was an honest man. The doctor was puzzled, however, for he had long ago learned that all symptoms of illness were not physical.

"Jurd," he asked, "why don't you want to die? We all have to."

The blue, wrinkled lids narrowed till the eyes showed only as black slits.

"That," snarled the sick man, "is none of your durned business, Doc! I got reasons of my own for wantin' to keep on livin' for a while yet. Tell you what I'll do though. I'll bet you a hundred steers against two thousand dollars I'll stick it out for more'n a year."

"You haven't got a hundred steers, Jurd."

The parchment face wrinkled until it resembled that of some ancient mummy suddenly become animate.

"What's the difference if I ain't?" Jurd chuckled. "I kin steal 'em somewhere. Want to bet?"

Dr. Bragg smiled and waved a hand.

"Keep on living, Jurd, as long as you can. No, I don't want to get your heirs into trouble over cattle you stole before death. Hope you live for a hundred years."

"Don't want to last that long," retorted the rancher. "Gimme time to finish one little job and I'll be willin' for the Lord to take me."

"The Lord?" chuckled Dr. Bragg. "It's the devil that gets the likes of you, Jurd. You've stolen too many cattle and done too much other mischief for the Lord to want you."

"Then let the devil take me," agreed Nason. "Just lemme get some flesh on my bones agin and durned if I won't give him a tussle and let him have his horns and tail to boot. You know, Doc, I allus did have a sort of hankerin' to tussle with the devil."

"You'll get the chance, and pronto," the doctor said bluntly. "Now live sensibly, drink three or four glasses of moonshine a day and you'll last six months."

The fire seemed to have gone out of Jurd Nason as he descended the stairs slowly. It was as if death waited at

the bottom. For once in his life he prayed, prayed for time in which to finish one job he had meant for years to do.

"If I just knowed where the——is!" he muttered as he neared the street. "If I just knowed where to find him I got plenty strength and time to kill him. I orter struck out years ago and done it."

To old Jurd murder was not a great job. The difficulty now was in finding his victim. Bluff and outwardly confident as he was, he doubted his ability to make a long, hard search. He blinked as he came out into the midday sun of Verde's dusty main street.

"Git me a dram of bar'l likker," he told himself. "Doc, he don't know what he's a-talkin' about."

He feared, however, that the doctor did know what he was talking about. He cursed himself for not having consulted the physician a year ago.

"I been too durned easy and broodin' over it," he grumbled to himself as he shuffled towards a saloon. "I just set and figgered how I'd kill him, 'stead of settin' out and doin' it. That——is raisin' cows somewhere, and if I knowed where I'd make such short work of him he wouldn't know whether he was hit by a bullet or a bull!"

Jurd made a mental pact with Satan as he shuffled on, but he muttered it aloud to hear how it sounded, and perhaps to make it more binding.

"Old devil, you tell me where to find that——and I'll turn myself over to you to do what you like with me forever and forever. Amen."

Jurd was not destined to get his dram of barrel liquor just then, for as he neared the place where it was sold his still keen eyes saw a stranger approaching. The man was large, well dressed and a little corpulent, but unmistakably a cattle rancher, or had been one. His face was rosy and adorned with a flowing white moustache. White hair showed from under the brim of a Texas sombrero.

"Wal, by Gawd!" Jurd muttered. "Where'd he come from? He ain't nohow a stranger a-tall!"

With characteristic abruptness Jurd blocked the progress of the other man. The rosy face blanched and a look of sympathy came to the stranger's eyes as they beheld the emaciated specimen of humanity.

"Howdy, sir," said the portly man.

"Howdy hell!" cackled Jurd. "Ain't you Jim Bailey?"

"I used to be," returned the stranger as he looked closer. "You ain't——why, yes you are!"

"I used to be Jurd Nason, and I reckon I still am, by Gawd!"

They shook hands, and Bailey, who had accumulated more than enough money on which to retire, handled the emaciated paw gingerly for fear of breaking it.

"What's wrong, Jurd? You don't look well. There used to be a time when you could lick ten times your weight in wildcats and never feel it."

"Them times is gone," muttered Jurd almost tearfully. Then his fire of life burned high again. "Hell! I jest come from seein' the doc! The old——tells me I ain't got more'n six months to live. I told him he was a durned liar! Said my innards was all out of kilter, and I had to stop eatin' man's grub!"

"Best take the doctor's advice, Jurd."

"Wal, mebbe I will, but what I need right now is some bar'l likker. Le's take a dram or two."

They entered the saloon towards which Jurd had been shuffling.

"Some bourbon, sir," said Bailey, and looked towards his emaciated companion.

"Gimme some of the hottest durned stuff you got, barkeep," snarled Jurd. "I want somethin' to warm the wattles of my gizzard."

They filled their glasses from the same bottle. After they had drunk Jurd smacked his lips appraisingly, grunted:

"I tasted better likker, fact is I made better likker, Jim, but this stuff's got a bite to it. Gimme another dram, barkeep. I got the dinero to pay for 'er."

Bailey took a cigar, but Jurd downed another glassful of neat corn whisky, smacked his lips.

"Met Bill Hendricks a while ago, Jurd," said Bailey. "He told me you had a ranch of your own out in the mesquite flats."

"Yeah," admitted Jurd, "I run a few hundred cattle."

The fire of the whisky, and especially the meeting with the man for whom he had worked twenty years ago had put new life into Jurd to the extent that he would have bet a hundred steers against a lame cow that he would live for twenty years more.

To his almost savage mind there was something prophetic in this meeting with Bailey. He could not explain it to himself except that it made him feel younger, more hopeful. He touched Bailey's arm and called his attention to a poker game at the rear of the long drab room.

"See that handsome feller back there, Jim? The one with the fine clothes and the red necktie on. That's my boy, Pete. He ain't wuth a damn except to play poker and raise hell gen'rally. Figgers he's too purty to help his old man run a cow ranch."

"So that's Pete?" said Bailey reminiscently. "Why, he was just a baby when I left here." With characteristic friendliness he added that he would go and make himself known to Pete Nason.

"Let the——be!" ordered Jurd. "He ain't got the littlest bit of 'preciation of old friends like you."

Baily took a position from where he could watch Pete Nason. There was no doubt that the fellow was handsome, but about him there was something cold and sinister too. He played poker studiously, and there was a cigar tilted aslant from an end of his mouth. His expensive Stetson was drawn down over his eyes.

"I notice Pete totes a pistol, Jurd," said Bailey. "They still do round here as a rule, do they?"

"Yeah, some of 'em still do," said Jurd, "but Pete, he's got the idea he has to be a gunman to be a card sharp. He's allus gittin' into some shootin' scrape or other. Takes about all my money to keep him out of jail, Jim."

Jurd was feeling strong now, especially in his disdain for his son.

"Can you stand another?" asked Bailey, who had seen enough of Pete Nason.

"Can I stand another?" cackled Jurd. "Say, I ain't never been a two-drink man in my life. Doc Bragg, he tells me I don't have to cut out the likker. Gimme some more of that tarantler-juice, barkeep!"

Bailey had not forgotten the Jurd Nason he had known in former years. That Jurd had wanted nothing better than to get roaring drunk and then see how many men he could thrash. Now, though Jurd looked as if the Herculean days were definitely of the past, Bailey decided it was time to part company, as Jurd might break loose at any moment. There was a glint in his deep-set black

eyes and a faint glow of the parchment skin over his high cheekbones.

"Well, I'm sure glad I ran across you, Jurd," said Bailey. "But I'm sorry to see you looking so poorly. Take good care of yourself and you'll prove to that doctor he's a liar. May see you again before I leave town, old man. You see I'm just travellin' round to see how old spots look."

Jurd followed as Bailey moved towards the swinging doors. He was reluctant to part from this man who had become rich and who seemed to have defied the years, for he still clung to the belief that there was something prophetic about their meeting. Without showing the impatience he felt, Bailey stopped on the sidewalk. After all, he could spare a few more minutes for this former friend who looked as if he had not so many thousand left.

"By the way, Jurd," chuckled Bailey, "not so long ago I met an old friend of ours out in Arizona."

"Yeah? Who was he, Jim?"

"Joe Leighton, Jurd. You sure remember Joe Leighton, don't you?"

Jurd Nason felt the hot flame of hate inside his head. Of all the men in the world he had hated Joe Leighton most, and still hated him. For more than twenty years he had held and nourished the belief that Joe Leighton had robbed him of the one woman he had loved, and for this he had sworn over and over that he would kill Leighton.

"Why yeah——" he muttered, trying to mask his feelings from Bailey. "Yeah, I recollect Joe. How's he doin'?"

"Makin' money," said Bailey, as if he were pleased when any man made money. He started to move away, explaining that he had an appointment.

"Jest a minute, Jim! Jest a minute!" Jurd objected as with momentarily strong fingers he gripped the other man's arm. "Where is Joe Leighton located? Durned if I don't think I'd like to pay him a visit one of these days. You see that durned doctor advised me to git out to Arizony for my health. May take him up."

Two minutes later Nason knew where to find the man he most hated. Then as he watched Bailey swagger away he felt his strength begin to ebb, as if the prosperous visitor had brought it and was taking it away. Jurd sidled to the saloon wall and leaned against it for a few minutes. He had

to kill Joe Leighton. This done, he would abide by the terms of his pact with the devil.

"Dunno whether I'm able to make that trip to Arizona and do the job," he muttered. "Dunno. Reckon I'll have to git Pete to help out on this, mebbe. He figgers he's a gun-slinger. Now I'll give him a chance to prove whether he is or not. By Gawd, I'm willin' to cash in the minute after I git word Joe Leighton's been rubbed out, the——! Yeah, mebbe Pete's got love enough for his old pappy to do this for him. Mebbe."

With a partial return of strength, Jurd shuffled into the saloon and headed for the poker game.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Being able to fleece two cowboys from towards the Pecos, Pete was reluctant to quit the game. He declared that he would not, but old Jurd's eyes flashed fire like those of some grotesque corpse come back to devilish life. "I'm winnin'!" Pete muttered. "I'll be along after a while."

"You'll be along right now!" snapped the old man. "And what's more you'll lose plenty money if you don't come. Don't think you're the only man for this job. I can get plenty as will do it."

Pete's cold eyes became sardonically inquisitive.

"What job? I ain't lookin' for any job. I can make more playin.'"

Jurd Nason had started to shuffle round one of the other players. He reached out a big, clawlike hand.

"Are you comin', Pete, or do I have to drag you by the scruff of the neck?" he shrilled with a curse. "I'm still man enough to do it, and don't you think I ain't!"

"All right," Pete assented sourly. "But I ain't lookin' for no job."

"Don't care whether you're lookin' for it or not. You're goin' to do this one for me."

The two were seldom seen together in Verde, and as they emerged from the saloon now they drew looks and speculation.

"Jurd looks like some old Injun ready to die," commented one man.

"And Pete's plenty dandified," said another. "He ain't worth the powder to blow out what little brains he's got."

"It looks to me," drawled a third, "like Jurd is makin' Pete go against his will. Jurd must have set on him hard."

Even in his flamboyant clothes Pete looked spoiled and sullen. He and his father climbed into a rickety buckboard to which two good bay horses were hitched. Savage and shiftless though he was, Jurd knew and liked good horses and insisted on having them even if they had to be stolen.

They followed the road that led among thickets of prickly-pear and jack-oak for a mile before Pete muttered;

"Well, what'd Doc Bragg say?"

Jurd's laugh was like the sound of an echo of death rattle in his bony throat.

"Said I might not last more'n six months, Pete. Didn't give me more'n a year at the outside."

Pete turned to stare. Weeks had passed since he had heard such good humour in his father's voice. He saw a grinning mask of face.

"You don't seem to be worryin' much about it."

"Worryin'?" cackled Jurd. "Say, I'm happier'n I been for years. Got the best damned news I heard in a coon's age."

Pete was puzzled. He knew his father was savage, reckless, disdainful of the rights of others, but he had never suspected him of being so desperate that he could laugh at the prospect of imminent death.

"If I had only a year to live I wouldn't be feelin' so happy about it, Pap."

Cackling mirthfully was not enough to relieve Jurd's emotions. He tickled the rumps of the bays with the lash of the short whip and saw them flick their tails as if they, too, had caught some of his savage pleasure. With still masterful hands he pulled them down to a steady trot. Their high-stepping pace was in utter disharmony with the rattling and swaying of the rickety buckboard.

Death did not frighten Jurd any more than life had frightened him. He had never speculated upon the origin of life or upon where he would go after life was finished, though paradoxically he believed devoutly in heaven and hell and less firmly in a God in heaven than he did in a Satan in hell. He was secretly jubilant because he was soon to

get the opportunity to match wits with Satan, wits and strength. Some power—not now worth speculating about—would put new hard muscles on his big bones before it came his time to battle with Satan.

Pete, on the other hand, was frightened. He had got his living and the little money he had had for gambling from his father. With his father gone he would be without source of funds. Still, there was the ranch. With old Jurd out of the way he might get the whole spread, worthless though it might be.

"I ain't afeard of dyin'," chuckled Jurd. "Fact is I soter look forward to it with pleasure, Pete."

To Pete, tall and hard-muscled and young, it was almost as if he rode with death, as if death guided two good horses along the rutted road. On the other hand it seemed impossible that Jurd would die. To Pete, Jurd seemed as old as time itself.

"But you ain't goin' to die, Pap!"

"The hell I ain't!" shrilled Jurd. Doc Bragg says I am, and I feel it inside my innards, 'specially in my head. Better men'n me's had to die."

"A lot better!" Pete sneered silently. Aloud he said:

"Trouble with you, Pap, is that right now I think you're scared of dyin,' and it's makin' you a little loco."

Jurd turned a sepulchral face that contorted with rage. "Don't you be tellin' me I'm loco, you durned wuthless pup!" he shrilled. "I'll drag you out of this rig by the scruff of the neck and larrup you with this whip! I tell you I'm happier'n I been in years. If you figger dyin' can scare Jurd Nason you're barkin' up the wrong tree! My head's clear as a bell, and if you don't believe it just hint as how I'm loco agin!"

Petulant sullenness masked Pete's handsome face now, for he was still thinking of the profitable poker game. He twisted an end of his black moustache angrily.

"You said you had a job for me?" he grunted, wanting to discover what it was his father had for him to do, though he was by no means sure he would do it. He was anxious to return to Verde before the two gullible cowboys left town or lost their wages to some other slick-fingered gambler.

"Yeah!" shrilled Jurd. "I said as how I had a job for you!"

"Ridin'?"

The old man pursed his bluish lips, for he had not yet considered the details of the manner in which he would have his enemy killed. It was hard indeed for him to confess that he was unable to perform any job whether it be the marking of a rustled calf or the performance of some herculean feat.

"There'll be ridin' to it," he muttered. "Mebbe a lot of ridin'."

Pete shrugged and said he was not going to ride after cattle any more. There was more money in playing cards, and it was much easier.

"Durn your gamblin'!" snarled Jurd. "I ain't talkin' about cyards!"

As vent for his sullen rage, Pete jerked his pistol and fired. A rabbit, squatting at the edge of the thicket, leaped high, flopped convulsively as it hit the ground, its head shot off. Jurd was all but unbalanced as the horses bolted. He cursed as he hauled them back to a stop.

"You durned idjit!" he snarled. "You needn't be givin' me no example of your fancy shootin'. I know you can do it!"

Pete sullenly blew at the smoke that curled from the muzzle of the six-shooter, rammed it back into his holster.

"There's one thing I'd as well tell you right now," Pete swore. "I ain't takin' part in the rustlin' of no more stock, Pap. Sooner or later the whole passel of us'll wind up in jail."

Jurd hauled the bays to a walk, spat tobacco-juice and profanity from between his bluish lips.

"Who said anything about stealin' cattle?"

"Well, when you said you had work for me to do before it's usually meant stealin' cattle," growled Pete. "I don't intend to go to nobody's damned jail."

"You keep on usin' that pistol of yourn promiscuous and you'll wind up with a rope round your neck!" snarled Jurd. "I already paid out upward of five hundred dollars in gittin' you out of shootin' scrapes, Pete, durn you!"

Pete declared sullenly that he would repay the money.

"Don't want it back!" Jurd snarled. "What good would money do me when I'm goin' to cash in, anyway? But there is somethin' you can do to pay me though, and at

the same time make honest money for yourself. You recollect Joe Leighton, the——?"

"I heard you talk about him," Pete said sourly, then grinned. "He was one of your old amigos, Pap?"

"One of my amigos?" Jurd gasped, then began to curse Joe Leighton. "I hate the ground that——walks on, Pete! And I know where he is now! That's what makes me so durned happy. Seems like the Lord hisself sent me this word afore I died!"

Pete had never known the full story of his father's feud with Leighton, or if he had heard it he had paid little attention. He had heard his father say many times that if he could find Leighton he would kill him. Knowing Jurd, principally because he knew himself, Pete grinned. It would be like the old man to fraternize amiably with an enemy before he killed him.

"So that was Joe Leighton you was drinkin' with in the Longhorn, eh?" Pete laughed. "He sure looked like he was grass-bellied with money, Pap."

"Huh? What you talkin' about? That wasn't Leighton, durn him! That was Jim Bailey. He tells me where I can find Leighton. Bailey, he used to run cattle here afore you was dry back of the ears, Pete."

Pete muttered that he had heard ranchers and cowboys talk about Jim Bailey. Jurd's black eyes twinkled between their blue, wrinkled lids.

"Bailey tells me jest where I can find Leighton, the——! What's more, he tells me Leighton's made a pile of money. It'll sure giev me a heap of satisfaction to make it so's that dinero won't be of no more use to him!"

Pete remained silent, believing that all his father's protanity and threat were leading somewhere. He had already learned that it was sometimes profitable to let the other man make the first move. Now, as usual, his own father was merely an opponent in the hard game of life.

Though Jurd Nason still found it all but impossible to confess that he was unequal to the job of going to Arizona to kill Leighton, he made the confession with the same ruthless abandon he would have used in shooting his enemy had he been within pistol range.

"You got to do this for me, Pete! When I learn that Joe Leighton's dead and one of my own flesh and blood kilt him, I'll die peaceable and happy."

As the bays trotted onward the son waited, handsome face wearing the mask of impassivity gambling had trained it to wear.

"You'll do this for me, Pete?" Jurd demanded with profane accompaniment. "It ain't much of a job, and I've done a hell of a lot for you. If it hadn't been for me they'd jailed you for shootin' Jeff Dinning here in the Mesquite Saloon that time a couple months ago."

Pete grunted that Dinning had needed shooting. Besides he had not been seriously hurt.

"What right did that——have foolin' round my girl, anyway?"

"You mean that purty Rosita?" demanded Jurd.

"Yeah."

"Well, sooner or later that wench is goin' to get you into trouble," said Jurd. "Take one of them mixed greasers and Texans and they got all the bad traits of both sides and durned few of the good."

"You leave Rosita out of this, Pap!" Pete ordered insolently. "She's all right. I don't figure to let anybody fool round a girl I'm goin' to marry."

Jurd's lips compressed until they formed an ugly corrugated line, and his eyes seemed to creep forward in horrified amazement.

"You a-goin' to marry her, Pete? Why, she's just a half-breed Mex!"

"Marry her if I want to! This ain't none of your business, Pap!"

Slowly the old man's eyes retreated into their hollow sockets, and they were filled with brutal cunning. After all, what did it matter whom Pete married so long as he did this job first? If Pete were going to marry he would need money.

"Dunno as I want to ride clean out to Arizona," Pete declared, by way of leading a tentative card. "Besides, this ain't my fight, Pap."

"Well, it's mine!" Jurd roared. "And what's more if I wasn't standin' with one foot in the grave and the other slidin' I wouldn't ask no durned man to do if for me! Besides, you're my own son, and——"

"I sort of hope I am," Pete interrupted facetiously.

"Wal, by hell, you are!" swore Jurd. "Now, I'll tell you what I'll do, Pete. I'll call it square on them five hundred

dollars I spent to keep you out of jail and pay you three hundred more to boot provided you kill Joe Leighton."

Pete smiled as if not much interested. Cold brutality drove the cunning from the old man's black eyes.

"That's fair pay, considerin' the job, Pete,"

Inwardly Pete's pulses drummed with the hope of getting the three hundred. Never in his twenty-six years had he had more than a hundred dollars at one time. Still he was a gambler. He must not forget that. There was grim anticipatory pleasure, too, in the thought of actually killing a man. He realized that his gunplay had not yet established him as a killer.

"Make it five hundred and I'll do the job, Pap," he drawled as if this were to be the price of exterminating a coyote or a jack-rabbit.

"Five hundred!" Jurd hit the bays savagely with the whip. Then he braced back in the seat and hauled them to their haunches. "All right, you robbin' ——, I'll make it five hundred!"

Pete, who loathed the thought of returning to the drab ranch and probable work, ordered a stop. Jurd hauled tighter on the reins and the bays came to a blowing stop.

"Well, what you want?"

"I want that five hundred. I'm headin' back for Verde. Want to leave for Arizona to-morrow."

"Like hell!" old Jurd sneered. "What you want is to see that there Rosita, and get in another game. You figger I'm a total durned fool, Pete?"

Pete did not answer. He stepped gracefully to the ground and hitched the elaborately holstered ivory-handled six-shooter to another position.

"I'm payin you five hundred to kill Joe Leighton!" snapped Jurd. "But I'm holdin' back four hundred till you fetch me back proof that you done it, Pete. A hundred'll be plenty for your expenses out to Arizony and back."

Pete, visualizing what he could do in one night with a hundred, asked for that sum. Jurd swore that a hundred was the limit of what he would pay until he had evidence that Joe Leighton was dead.

"All right!" Pete shrugged gracefully. "You have the other four hundred when I get back from Arizona, Pap, or I'll take it out of your durned old hide!"

"I'll have it!"

Pete untied the rope of the good sorrel they had been leading behind the buckboard. He tightened the saddle girth, brought the sorrel to a place near the right front wheel. "Now tell me where I can find this feller Leighton out in Arizona," he ordered, after he had taken the hundred dollars his father had fished from a pocket of his dingy best pants.

Jurd carefully repeated what he had learned from Bailey. They did not shake hands, this ruthless father and son. Jurd said:

"I expect you to do this job durned good, Pete. And when it's done I'll be ready to undertake that tussle with old Satan any old time."

"I'll do it right, Pap," Pete agreed as he swung to his saddle and reined towards the village he had left an hour ago. He was already planning what he would do with the money that burned his pocket.

As Jurd started the bays towards the drab and ugly ranch he chuckled with much pleasure.

"I'll stick it out here till Pete, he fetches back word he's killed that ——!" he promised himself. "Then I won't care a durn when the old devil takes me. I allus had a sneakin' idee that Satan feller wasn't half the man he claims to be!"

## CHAPTER SIX

PETE NASON's plan was to find the gullible cowboys with whom he had been playing, and increase his hundred dollars by what they had left. As he went into the Longhorn, however, he saw that the poker table was empty.

"Thought the old man made you go home," remarked Sam Glass, the bartender.

Pete paled with anger. He did not like to be accused of being made to do anything, especially by his father. He shoved the Stetson jauntily back on his sleek black head.

"The old man just wanted to talk over a little business with me, that's all. I rode out a ways with him."

Pete glanced inquiringly towards the empty table. Glass said:

"Mike Cassidy showed up and took their roll. Saved you the trouble, Pete."

"I knowed somebody's take it," Pete said sullenly,

"so I figured it might as well be me." Though he forced a laugh, it was accompanied by the thought that he would charge against his father what he had lost by not being able to finish his fleecing of the two cowboys.

Glass set bottle and glass upon the bar.

"I'll take just one," Pete said condescendingly. "Got some important business to tend to to-night."

Normally egotistical, Pete was now all but bursting with importance. He was to earn five hundred dollars by going to Arizona, and when he returned he would have earned also a notch on the handle of his right six-shooter. However, he was cunning enough to refrain from bragging about the proposed murder of a man. As befitted one of his present station he went to the best restaurant and ate a hearty and expensive supper. He bought some good cigars and tilted one from an end of his mouth as he sauntered down the street, quickening pace as he neared the end. He turned towards an adobe house that had a pricklypear thicket for background. At the doorway he was met by a wrinkled Mexican woman with clawlike hands and stringy grey hair. Her black eyes brightened.

"Hah, Don Pedro!" she exclaimed. "Like un mil pesos you look this fine evening, no?"

"Fell like a million," retorted Pete. "Where's she at?"

"You would see her, no?"

"What else you reckon I'm here for?"

"But if she is not at home?" the old woman parried.

Pete shrugged and replied that he would sit down and wait, but his importance and impatience were such that he found this impossible. He handed the old woman a dollar.

"Now tell her I want to see her pronto!" he ordered. "I ain't got much time to spare, Manuela."

The wrinkled hag effaced herself, and as Pete entered the gloomy room he made out a tall girl waiting. It was not so dark here but he could see her crimson dress and the soft shine of her brown eyes and the bright spots on her smooth cheeks. Though she was a tall girl, even now, at eighteen, her rounded curves presaged voluptuousness within a very few years. To any man she would have been beautiful. She lifted tentative, tempting arms to Pete.

"Ah, Pedro mio!" she whispered, then her red lips parted and she laughed happily. "But why are you here?

I had the news that you had gone to the rancho with your padre. You did that, no?"

Nason's face darkened with sudden jealousy.

"Who told you that?" he demanded, wondering whether he would have to shoot another rival.

She explained breathlessly that Domingo Bastilla, a neighbour, had brought the news. Bastilla had seen Pete and old Jurd drive out of town.

"But for why do you look at me this way?" she begged with a petulant pout. "I have done something the ver' wrong, no?"

Nason swept her into his arms and crushed his lips against hers. To him she was the acme of womanhood, and for a moment or two he felt that he could not leave her long enough to ride to Arizona and kill Joe Leighton.

"You're so damned pretty I'm jealous of every man in this town!" he told her.

"But no, no!" She took his face between soft, warm hands. "I am not going for let any other man fall in love with me!"

He clutched her rounded forearms.

"But what I don't want is you fallin' in love with them!" he laughed. "Half the men in Verde are in love with you already, Rosita."

She smiled quizzically, then tossed her head.

"Then is that not the proof that I am ver' bonita and ver' sympatica, no?"

Presently they sat down on a rickety couch over which a clean gaudy blanket was spread. She laid a soft arm about his neck and smiled at him with query in the depths of her dark eyes.

"For why did you not go to the rancho with your padre? Domingo Bastilla is not the man for lie to me. As you know he is old, and not in love with me."

Pete explained that he had had some business to discuss with his father. He had merely ridden out of town for a few miles then returned. He found it difficult to tell her he was to go away, and in fact was debating whether he would go after all, for he was afraid some other man would win her affection during his absence.

"But for why?" she insisted in alarm when he finally told her he had to go to Arizona. "You no longer love me, no?"

"Love you?" he demanded hoarsely. "Say, that's why I don't want to go! Gawd, I don't know how I'm ever goin' to get along without you!"

She nestled back into the curve of his encircling arm. Her eyes became smoky.

"Then you can take me with you, no, Pedro mio?"

He told her this would be impossible. He was going on important business for his father. It had been that business they had discussed. As proof, he reached his free hand into a pocket and produced the one hundred dollars he had received from Jurd.

"But it is so much dinero!" Rosita sighed as she beheld the crumpled banknotes. "It is enough for us to marry on, no?"

Holding her close, Pete assured her he would have much more money than that when he returned from Arizona. She plucked a ten-dollar bill from his hand, looked innocently into his eyes.

"It is not that I want for steal this," she laughed, "or to be what you call the leetle peeg. But can I have it for buy the reeng, no?"

With some reluctance he allowed her to keep the banknote. She poked it inside the bosom of her crimson dress, laughed, then regarded her soft, tapered hand.

"It will be so nice for to have a reeng on these finger, no?" she asked, and held the finger for him to kiss. "You shall place all your love on it now so I may think while you are gone that I am your esposa, Pedro mio."

Her warmth and nearness made Pete Nason confess to her that he was going to Arizona to kill a man. She paled, and for a moment the colour vanished from her parted lips.

"But no, no! It is not the truth you tell, Pedro! You are make the joke, no?"

Though inwardly cruel and rough, Pete Nason was possessed of a veneer that attracted women, and it was with this that he had attracted and fascinated the half-breed Mexican girl whose faith he continually doubted, though had he realized he would have known she was as loyal to him as though they had been wedded by the village priest. His brain, never too alert, saw at once that he had made a blunder, and he said quickly:

"Aw, what difference would it make, Rosita, if I did

have to kill a man? I'd be back here within a couple of weeks, a month, anyway."

"But no, no!" she cried fiercely. "A man you must not kill, Pedro mio. If you do that they will put you in jail, and you will die with a rope round your neck! And that—oh, Mother of God!"

She drew away, placed flat hands over her eyes to shut out the horrible visualization. Her bosom heaved with sobs.

Though puzzled a little, Pete smiled sardonically. Behind his moustache he muttered:

"Damned if she don't love me for sure. I reckon I can trust her while I'm gone."

Her hands dropped, to reveal eyes brimming with tears. She groped out, found his hands.

"Tell me, Pedro mio! Tell me you are not going to Arizona for to kill a man!"

His hearty laugh, the reassuring pressure of his fingers brought colour and a smile to her face, dried some of her tears. He drew her close again, and she lifted a rapt, trusting face to his as he looked down at hers.

"Just wanted to scare you," he laughed. "Just wanted to see how much you loved me, Rosita."

"How much I love you?" she whispered. "How much? Madre de Dios, I could not love you any more, Pedro! Before el buen Dios I swear it! You believe Rosita, no? You believe her when she tell you this?"

She drew his head down and kissed him impetuously when she saw belief of her in his eyes.

"Ah, you have make me ver' happy again, Pedro!" she sighed, and drew away from him to place her hands to her bosom. "But Dios, you have give me the scare, Pedro! Now tell me why you are going to make the trip to Arizona and be away for so long from your Rosita! If it is for months and months, each night I shall count on my beads and say a prayer for you, my beloved. But only tell me you do not go to kill a man!"

"Course not!" he laughed. "It's just that there's a feller out there that owes old Jurd some money. Owed it for a long time, and the old man wants me to ride out there and collect it for him. He sure needs that dinero now. You know he's a very sick old man, Rosita."

Her eyes softened, and every feature of her face was made more beautiful by sympathy and understanding.

"Si," she whispered. "I know. Your padre, bless his soul, he is a ver' seeck hombre. So much have you told me, and I have been told also by Domingo Bastilla. Only esta tarde did Domingo say that your padre, he walks with one foot in the grave, Pedro mio. He said your padre will not live the year out, but tell me this is not the true!"

Though Pete Nason thought almost heartlessly of what the doctor had told Jurd, he laughed and said:

"My old man die within a year? Why, he's as tough as rawhide, Rosita. Bet you this dinero he'll live longer than you and me do."

She sighed with relief and pleasure now as she nestled again into his embrace. He wished he did not have to make this ride to Arizona.

"Now you must tell me, querido!" she commanded, as she lifted trusting eyes. "How many long months shall you be gone?"

"Months?" Pete laughed. "Say, I'll be back here inside of two or three weeks! All I've got to do out there is collect that bill for old Jurd. The hombre as owes it to him is rich, and there won't be any trouble. Jurd'd got it long ago, only he just found out to-day where this feller was, sabe?"

Happy with relief now, Rosita wanted details. Pete told her what he wanted to tell, lied about the rest. He did not think it necessary to conceal the fact that he was going to a town called Mesa Prieta. Rosita repeated the name, then was upon her feet. She hurried to another room, and was back in a few moments with paper and pencil.

From the Spanish side of her family she had inherited the ability and desire to write beautifully, though she had had little schooling. Now she wrote Mesa Prieta, Arizona. Then as she began to write his name Pete realized that it would not be advisable for him to reach Mesa Prieta under his real name, since his actual purpose was murder.

"Wait!" he said as he gripped her wrist. "I don't want everybody there knowin' who I am. You goin' to write me a letter"

"One letter?" she gasped. "Why Pedro mio, I shall write la carta each day you are away! You want me to, no?"

"Sure thing," he agreed mendaciously. "But lemme see. I got it, we'll just turn my name around a little bit.

Suppose you write to Nate Peters? Yeah, that'll do. I'll be Nate Peters."

She looked at him in troubled wonder and let her hands lie limp upon her knees. Why should he not want to be known by his real name in Arizona?

"It's this way, Rosita," he explained as he read her troubled eyes. "You see the man that owes old Jurd this money is rich and—well, prominent out there, and it might make him feel bad if I came out there under my own name and asked him for the dinero he's owed old Jurd for so long. You sabe, don't you, querida?"

To her simple and trusting mind this was plausible. She smiled in acknowledgment of his display of superior masculine intelligence. She said, poising her pencil:

"You must spell these Nate Peters for me, Pedro."

She wrote carefully as he spelled the alias. Her eyes were very tender as she lifted them from the white scrap of paper.

"You will like to get the letter from your Rosita, no?" she queried naively. "You will like to get one each day, no?"

"Bet your life I will!" Pete assured her. "But I'd like it better if I could see you each day, Rosita."

The sky blazed with stars and crickets fiddled ceaselessly and fireflies darted this way and that when he stood with her outside the front door of the adobe casa. She clutched his hand furiously, yet with pleasure and pride and not a little misgiving.

"You must promise me, Pedro, that you will not fall in love with any other girl while you are away from me! That I will not have you do!"

He laughed, drew her closer.

"I won't do that, querida," he assured her. "Say, I'll be in love with you worse than I am now when I get back! Don't you lose any sleep worryin' about that."

He bent and kissed her quivering lips. She drew away.

"Of course I shall worry about it!" she cried fiercely. "And if you fall in love with another girl while you are out there in Arizona, I shall come and keel her, Pedro!"

"Aw don't be loco!" he half snarled, then laughed and swaggered away into the darkness.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

As Minton looked across the table at Lida Leighton he would have believed her unreal had he not known her so well. In her new rig she was lovelier than anything he had ever dreamed of in the dreams of his youth.

"Jest common flesh and blood with too durned much swellhead," he muttered to himself by way of making himself believe. "It beats all holler how a woman can be so durned mule-headed."

Lida lifted her face from apparent contemplation of her hands.

"What were you saying, Mr. Minton?"

"Sayin'? Sayin'? I was jest a-thinkin' as how that's a mighty fetchin' outfit you got on, Lida, durned if it ain't. That there green jest sorter fits in with your eyes and your hair, like. mebbe it was a green hill with blue and yaller flowers on it."

"My hair isn't yellow!"

"Well, what if it ain't? It's purty, and I was jest makin' a comparison, so to speak. Anyway it ain't red."

"Indeed it isn't!" she agreed stiffly.

A man appeared at the doorway and called to the hotel-keeper.

"Be back in a minute or two to keep you company," the old man said. "Best eat a couple of them fresh eggs, Lida."

"Couple of grandmas, eh?" she laughed. "No thanks. I'll take my eggs without the feathers on them."

"They're fresh!" the old man snorted.

"Mr. Orton didn't think so."

"Huh! Him!"

The old man returned presently, wearing a worried expression.

"Now what's wrong?"

"Sam Hazard," said Minton, "jest told me as how it's a knowed fack as how Kirk and them three men of hisn rode towards the Lazy L basin yistiday, late. They ain't come back."

"Well, what of it?"

"What of it? If you take the short trail, you'll have to ride through the same kentry where them outlaws are, that's what of it!"

Lida regarded him with steady eyes that were superior and a little contemptuous.

"How do you know they are outlaws?" she challenged.

"It's knowed they steal cattle."

"They're rustlers then," she corrected. "There are rustlers all over the range country. Why, I've seen and known dozens of them myself."

Minton's shoulders sagged.

"I wish you'd stay here till word can be sent out to your pa, Lida. That Kirk outfit's bad."

Lida demanded to be told why it was bad. This Minton could not answer cogently, though he was sincere in his contention.

"Well, they don't act reg'lar," he muttered. "Stealin' cattle on a small scale ain't good, is it? I got a hunch they're jest stallin' round here till they see the chance to pull off somethin' big."

"Shucks!" she scoffed. "If my father had been afraid like you are, where would we be now, Mr. Minton? Why, he'd likely be punching cattle for forty dollars a month instead of being the biggest rancher in this part of Arizona. Goodness, if he thought I was afraid of four common rustlers he'd be ashamed of me! Mother would, too. Don't you see I want to get back home? I haven't been home for six months."

The old man regarded her with more tolerance. If she were not actually glad to be back in the range country! Well, the range country had its own ways of taking the swell-headedness out of folks. He could not explain, even to himself, why he was worried, but the worry persisted and grew.

"This here Kirk and his outfit is durned mysterious," he argued. "They don't act to me exactly like the ordinary run of cattle thieves."

"They aren't," she declared. "From what you say I don't believe they are any more than petty rustlers. The idea of stealing a few cattle and selling them skinned to old Bruenor, the butcher! These four outlaws of yours are pinheads, Mr. Minton!"

"They ain't mine!" he bristled. "I wouldn't own 'em! I wouldn't have 'em as a gift!"

Lida began to regard him with a quizzical light in her eyes. On her lips was a taunting smile that made the old man feel his helplessness more than ever.

"Speaking of mystery——" she began.

"Who said anything about mystery?"

"You said the Kirk outfit was mysterious," she reminded. "Now how about this Mr. Orton? Is he mysterious, too?"

"Him?" the old man ejaculated. "What makes you think he is mysterious?"

"Well, he didn't tell me anything about himself. What do you know about him, Mr. Minton?"

The old man had to admit he knew nothing important about the newcomer.

"He just come a couple days ago, Lida. He seems honest and upright, and you got to admit he's agreeable."

"I don't know whether I'll admit that or not," she replied slowly, while she thought of how Orton had left without even offering to keep her company through breakfast, and of how he had not suggested a second time that he ride with her to the Lazy L. "How do you know he isn't one of the Kirk outfit?"

"One of that durned outfit?" The old man was so surprised that his mouth remained open.

"Yes. How do you know he isn't?"

"I jest know it!" he declared angrily, knowing he had no other foundation for his argument. "I jest know he ain't a member of no outlaw outfit, Lida."

"I'm not so sure of that."

Minto appraised her keenly, wondering what she had discovered where he himself had failed.

"So that was why you was scared to let him ride home with you, was it?"

"Scared? Mr. Minton, you know I'm not afraid of anybody or anything! I'm perfectly able to take care of myself anywhere. It's not in the Leighton blood to be scared."

"Huh!" the old man snorted weakly. "It's in the Leighton blood to be durned foolish at times, though!"

"Perhaps," the girl agreed loftily.

The fat cook appeared now with her fried ham and hotcakes.

"There ain't no bristles on that hog meat," the old man reminded.

She smiled at him in a manner that made him yearn to spank her then kiss her.

"Why, Mr. Minton! I wasn't looking for bristles. I was just looking for pinfeathers."

He admitted defeat as he watched her turn over the generous slice of ham with her fork. She looked up at him and her nose wrinkled a little.

"Is it fresh, sir?"

"It ain't fresh!" he yelled. "It's salt meat and you know it! It's so durned old I had to soak it in alkali water for ten days to git it soft enough to eat!"

"Really?"

"Yeah, by gosh! And if you don't like it go somewhere else and eat! I thought that Orton was finicky enough with them eggs of hisn!"

Lida tasted a bite of the ham.

"It's really delicious, Mr. Minton."

"I don't care whether it's delicious or not!" he snorted. "It's the best I got and I ain't got no apologies to make for it." He scrambled to his feet and stalked out, chilled by fear of what he had done.

"If that feller is a member of the Kirk outfit," he grumbled to himself, "I maybe played hell."

In the middle of the dusty little lobby he stood and pondered. He could get one man, yes, two, three, a dozen to ride with Lida to the Lazy L.

"Nope," he decided, "that wouldn't do. She'd somehow manage to make all of 'em turn back. Besides, I don't see why I orter worry about her gittin' into trouble."

Snowy-bearded, uncouth, he meditated more deeply. After all, why should he worry about her? Yet had she been his own spoiled daughter he could not have been more seriously concerned, though he had to admit he had little fact on which to base his worries. Something he might have called intuitive—had that word been in his vocabulary—kept bringing the thought of danger back to him.

"She's too durned purty and temptin' for this here kentry," he argued with himself. "I allus told Joe Leighton she'd git herself into trouble sooner or later. I wish I hadn't been so brash about this durned feller, Orton."

He was grateful for the arrival of Aldrich with the sorrel pony, and hurried outside.

"Say," suggested the old cowboy, "you reckon I'd best measure her laigs to make sure these stirrups is the right length?"

"Measure her legs?" the old man repeated, bordering on savage rage.

"Why yeah," drawled Aldrich. "It's help in 'justin' these here stirrups, and save time if I could measure her laigs."

"Hell! Measure her head if you want to measure anything!" Minton exploded. "And tell me whether there's anything in it!"

"Then she still won't let any of us ride along with her?"

"She won't, and I got to the p'int where I don't give a durn whether she rides alone or with all the men in Mesa Prieta!"

"Then I don't either," agreed the old rider. "Well, this here's a fair-to-middlin' horse and she knows how to ride."

"She sure does," agreed Minton grudgingly, "anything that wears hair and walks on four legs. Drop them there reins and le's go in and take a drink while we're waitin' for her to come. She'll like as not waste a couple hours primpin' and fussin' for this ride."

"She is fussy, ain't she?" Aldrich said as they started for the nearest saloon.

"Fussy?" Minton challenged as all his anger and vexation fled. "Say, did you see her with that new rig on?"

"What rig?"

"Her rig, o' course! That new one she buys in 'Frisco. Though I gotta admit she don't know beans, she's purtier'n hell, and that there new outfit makes her ten times as purty."

"Deescribe it," commanded the old rider as they moved on.

In the saloon Minton elaborated on his description of the outfit and Aldrich imagined the whisky he drank was apple-green.

"Don't keer for another one," he growled absently. "I gotta see this here outfit for myself. Wouldn't miss it for ten drinks of whisky."

They returned to a place before the drowsy hotel. By this time news of Lida's arrival from San Francisco and the word that she planned to ride to the Lazy L alone had apparently spread to every home in the little town. From far and near men, women and children, Mexican and white, had started towards the hotel.

"She'll be madder'n a nest of yaller-jackets when she sees all these folks gathered round," said Minton.

"Well, she's got no business bein' a freak like in a circus," returned Aldrich. "I don't see why she fetches such a rig to a cow country anyway."

They were resigned to at least an hour of waiting, but the interval proved to be less than fifteen minutes. When Lida came out, walking like a queen yet strangely as if she belonged here, Aldrich gaped and let his wrinkled jaw remain slack while his squinted lids widened.

"My Gawd!" he muttered, and snapped shut his jaw. "Howdy, Lida!"

"Why howdy, Bill," she answered with a smile that melted the old rider's heart. "I'm mighty glad you got me a good bronco. Would you mind tying this package back of the saddle?"

"I'd sure admire to," he said humbly, and hated himself because of his facetious suggestion that he measure her legs. He watched her from the tail of an incredulous and admiring eye. She was waving and speaking to friends and acquaintances in the crowd.

"Well, she sure beats me," Minton grumbled to himself. "A while ago she was stand-offish as all getout, and now she's jest as friendly as she ever was. She must've learned actin' while she was away."

It was an affectionate, admiring and jealous Mesa Prieta that watched Lida Leighton ride away. She disappeared into a brushy gully, reappeared for a short time where the trail crossed a brushy ridge. She came out on a higher hogback, a supple green thing on a climbing sorrel horse. The wind flapped her green jacket and she turned towards it as if she defied anything that offered obstruction. She disappeared finally, and Mesa Prieta drew in its natural breath and began its comments.

As she swayed to the motion of the pony, Lida alternated between periods of songful exuberance and intervals of sombre abstraction. There was bitterness and anger in the latter, for she still felt hurt because the good-looking Bob Orton had not insisted on accompanying her to her father's ranch.

The sun was blazing down now from a tinny, cloudless sky, and she wiped little beads of perspiration from her forehead with a white silk handkerchief.

"Not so much like the cold winds and the fogs in San Francisco," she mused, "but I like it more."

Two hours after she had ridden out of Mesa Prieta she was rounding a rock-strewn, cactus-stippled point when suddenly her blood seemed to run cold and her heart to leap into her throat. Ahead were four heavily armed riders and a fifth horse. On this horse was a dirty tarpaulin, and from under it showed bloody, freshly slaughtered meat. The freshly removed hide of a yearling hung from one of the forks of the pack saddle. For a moment Lida's cold fright had gone and burning anger had come. This was Lazy L range, and these cheap thieves had killed and skinned a Lazy L yearling right beside the trail! She snapped a hand towards the new six-shooter and had forgotten that the good-looking stranger had obediently bought it for her in town.

"Don't do it!" ordered the foremost rider, who was now not ten yards away. "I'd sure hate to have to shoot a lady."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

LIDA reluctantly rested a trembling hand upon the saddle-horn. Horrified, but with none of her indignation gone, she surveyed the four faces before her. Two were bearded, one darkly, the other with stubbly sorrel hair. The third man was pinched-faced and sallow, with blue eyes that were not far enough apart to denote honesty. The man who had peremptorily ordered her to take her hand away from her weapon was the one who held most of her angry, frightened attention.

He was tall and broad, but lean of waist and hip. There was force of will in every line of his brown, blocky face. His cold eyes warmed a little and their blue seemed to deepen as they looked at her. This man's attire was more gaudy, more spectacular than that of the most flamboyant cowboy on a spree. Bone-handled pistols showed in embossed holsters at his hips.

Lida's anger increased when she realized that these four looked at her with disbelief and not with fear. They slowly encircled her as if they must see more closely to believe.

"Wal, by Gawd!" chuckled the rider with the sorrel

beard. "I sure didn't know they growed 'em like this round here, Jack!"

"Me neither," muttered the fellow with the pinched features. "If they grow many of 'em like this here, this is sure where I'm goin' to build my corral."

"She'll do," nodded the leader. "I didn't believe anything like her growed either, boys, not around here."

The black-bearded fellow added his comment now: "She's some surprise all right. I don't know yit she's real."

"Might pinch her and see," the lean one chuckled facetiously.

Lida swung flashing eyes upon him, and her right hand crept towards the pistol.

"You just try anything like that and see whether I'm real or not!"

"Rope that sort of talk, Slim," the leader warned. "It don't go. She looks like a lady."

To prove he was right Lida lifted a stubborn chin and looked steadily at him with a little contempt in her eyes.

"You're Jack Kirk," she accused.

"Glad to meet up with you, lady," he smirked. "And jest who are you?"

"And you tell me," she demanded, ignoring his question, "just what brand that yearling wore!"

"Lazy L."

The blue fire that flashed in her eyes was of itself enough to tell them her identity.

"Say, she's that Lazy L gal, the one that was s'posed to be back next week!" ejaculated the sorrel-bearded man. "You know we heard about her in town."

Lida had estimated these four as much more than petty thieves. They might steal lone beeves when necessity demanded, but their ultimate purpose was far beyond such thefts. She wished devoutly now that she had accepted Minton's advice and stayed in town until her father could have sent someone for her from the Lazy L. She admitted to herself she had known his advice was right even as he had been giving it.

She was certain her horse would not be a match for the animals these men rode if she tried to resort to flight. Besides, any one of them looked capable of killing her rather than letting her escape with the knowledge of their theft.

"Yes," she heard herself saying with calm she did not feel, "I'm Lida Leighton of the Lazy L. Take that darned yearling and let me by!"

"Oh, we'll take the beef," Jack Kirk sneered from behind his brown moustache, "but we ain't quite ready for you to get past."

"I'll shoot you if you don't get out of my way!" she threatened, and poised her right hand near the butt of the new six-shooter.

This threat brought derisive laughs from the four, and Lida indignantly replaced her gauntleted hand upon the horn. Her face was now red with rage and embarrassment as she realized how critically the rustlers were appraising her. Her eyes flashed and she demanded haughtily:

"Well, do I look all right? Or am I the first decent woman you ever saw?"

"Wal, if you don't look all right I sure never saw one as did," the black-visaged rider informed her soberly, though his eyes twinkled.

"You'll sure do for me," added the sallow one.

"You hombers corral that gab!" Kirk ordered as he swept his men with commanding eyes. "I don't want any more of it! This here's business."

Something in the way he spoke the last word made Lida remember the hazard Minton had made that the four were in the Mesa Prieta region for something bigger than cattle rustling. She tried to decide what their purpose was, and was appalled at the thought that they had meant to intercept her. But how had they known she was coming to-day? She found herself looking at the one with the sorrel beard.

"Didn't I see you in Aravaca yesterday afternoon?" she demanded angrily.

The man grinned at her, showing snaggy teeth discoloured by tobacco.

"Now, maybe you did," he said. "It may be I was there yesterday afternoon, ma'am."

That was it! This outlaw had probably been in Aravaca to get news of her arrival. He could have ridden all night ahead of the stage and joined his confederates with news of her coming. Yet if this were the case why were they out here with a slaughtered Lazy L yearling and headed for Mesa Prieta?

"What are you going to do with that meat?" she demanded, and again searched their faces in the hope of miraculously discovering that one of them was Bob Orton.

"Feed it to the buzzards and the coyotes now," Kirk said flatly.

"You're going to sell it to Bruenor, that crooked butcher in Mesa!" she flared.

"Feed it to the buzzards and coyotes," reiterated Kirk.

"But you have been selling skinned meat to that butcher," Lida insisted.

The outlaw leader nodded, grinned and said:

"You seem to know things."

"I know you've been selling old Bruenor Lazy L beef! Go ahead, take this on in to him!"

"And let you take this news to the Lazy L and let Leighton take after us with a dozen of his riders, eh?" sneered the man with the sorrel whiskers. "I jest reckon not!"

Kirk turned to him.

"Matt, unload the meat. Shuck it off into the thicket yonder. You help him, Slim."

The two led the beef-laden horse away and Lida was left with Kirk and the black-bearded rider. The former, as if to prove his skill in the saddle, spurred in and plucked her pistol from its holster.

"Here! You give me that!" she cried, but he laughed as he reared back his horse and rammed the new weapon inside his waistband.

"You might git yourself into trouble with it, miss," snickered the other outlaw.

"And you've already got yourself into trouble!" she retorted. "You just wait till word of this gets to the Lazy L!"

"It happens," drawled Jack Kirk with sinister inflection, "that you ain't goin' to get word of it to the Lazy L, beauty."

Lida went very pale, and her eyes became unnaturally large.

"What—what do you mean by that?"

"That when word of it gets to the Lazy L," Kirk informed flatly, "I'm goin' to send it."

Lida thought she saw a chance to grasp at hope.

"Then come on and we'll both ride to the ranch and call it square!" she laughed shakily, but before she had uttered

the last word she flushed with self-contempt. "Say, what is your game?"

"Makin' money," said the squat, black-visaged rider. "Makin' big money."

Then Kirk boldly confessed to her that their business was the stealing of rich mine-owners and ranchers and the holding of them for ransom. They had been operating south of the international border until recently, but down there the law had at last become too hot for them.

"We got news that there might be a good prize in the Mesa Prieta country," Kirk said with a meaning grin.

"You mean you heard of me?" Lida cried. "You thought I would bring money, is that it?"

"We heard there was a purty gal up here and her old man was plenty rich," said Kirk, his grin now sinister.

"Then you—you——" she faltered, and for a moment could think only of what a headstrong fool she had been.

"Why, yeah," laughed the outlaw leader, "we mean to make plenty money out of you, beauty. Oh, don't look so scared. We——"

"Who said I was scared?" flared Lida. "If you think so you're——"

"You're scared all right," Kirk corrected as he raised a peremptory hand. "You know that as good as me, but let me do the talkin' now. We don't make a practice of harmin' people we steal, that is if they don't cause us too much trouble. But we did have to cut one hidalgo's throat down on the Magdalena because he refused to pungle up the ransom we wanted. He was just a durned Mex, though."

Lida shuddered and slumped in her saddle. Oh, why hadn't she had sense enough to take Mr. Minton's advice? She knew she had been too much of a fool. However she had not lost all her stubborn spirit, and because of this she had to know at least a little of the immediate future.

"You are going to take me into Sonora?" she demanded.

"Maybe not clean there," the black-whiskered man replied enigmatically. "The Sonora climate sometimes don't jest quite suit us fellers."

"We won't take you all the way across," said Kirk. "There's a nice safe little place we know of down toward Guadaloupe Pass. You savvy that part of the country?"

"I have never been there!" Lida answered with all the iciness at her command.

Matt and Slim were now returning with the pack horse. Upon the dirty tarp folded across the saddle were smears of fresh blood. Already the buzzards, as if they were in league with the outlaws, were wheeling high above the thicket where the quarters of the yearling had been dumped.

"Say, Jack," Matt began as his eyes measured the pale girl, "it looks to me like this is the biggest haul we made yet, figurin' on how much her old man's supposed to be worth."

Slim's little eyes glowed with frightening fire, and he snickered:

"What's her old man's worth, eh? Well, if her and that rig she's wearin' is any indication, I'd say they'd have to put up a clean million pesos to get her back. She's the purtiest thing I ever seen, damned if she ain't?"

Kirk twisted in his saddle and his right hand touched a pistol.

"Slim," he said in his flat, ominous tone, "if you don't rope that sort of talk I'll flatten that fool face of yours with a hunk of lead! Don't let me have to tell you that again! This here is strict business with us. This here girl's worth big money, and that's all there is to it, unless she decides to act up."

The lustful fire faded from Slim's eyes. He grinned and showed his yellowish teeth.

"All right, boss! But she's so durned purty she sort of turns my head. I savvy it's all business with us."

"Then see you keep on savvyin'!" snarled Kirk, and let his gun slip back into its holster.

He now gave orders with brisk thoroughness that told Lida he was no novice at this business of kidnapping. She was allowed to keep her hands free but her ankles were lashed together under the belly of her sorrel horse. As they left the trail and headed along the brush-dotted plateau and southward Lida began to realize how insignificant she was when in the hands of men who cared not at all for her beauty and position except for the money they might bring.

As if he had a little spark of chivalry Kirk rode close beside her, and when he could he kept the brush from tearing the green habit, of which she had been so tremendously vain and proud. Lida thought of how sickeningly different this was from the surprising and triumphant arrival she had planned for the Lazy L where she had meant to laughingly

chide her father because he had not sent a rig to Mesa Prieta to meet her.

Lida looked at the broad, swaying back of the black-bearded man who led her horse, and wondered how her father would act when he received news of her abduction. Could he pay the ransom these outlaws would demand? Would he live up to his usual hot-headedness and come with all his fighting riders and try to take her without paying a single centavo?

"Tell me," she demanded suddenly as she turned towards the chief of the outlaws, "is there a fifth member of this outfit?"

For a moment Jack Kirk looked a little surprised. Then he gave her a stare that was sphinx-like in its lack of commitment. He shrugged.

"Four's always been a plenty," he said. "Hey, Slim! Head through that clearin' at the left!"

## CHAPTER NINE

ALL HER LIFE Lida Leighton had had and done just about what she liked, and now it was unbelievable that she should be a captive in the hands of four outlaws who candidly declared they wanted her for the money her release would bring. Angrily, desperately, she thought of commanding them to free her, but realized how ridiculous this would make her.

She racked her brains for some miraculous way in which word of her plight could be sent to the ranch or to Mesa Prieta. She devoutly hoped some of the Lazy L riders would appear and discover that she was a prisoner. To make her situation the more humiliating and embarrassing, she admitted that she had foolishly ridden squarely into the trap Kirk and his confederates had set.

"Oh, I should have stayed in Mesa!" she inwardly stormed. "Mr. Minton was right. Why didn't I wait till next week to come home?"

"That Bob Orton might have been gentleman enough to come with me!" she went on presently, forgetting that she had refused him permission to come. "Well, maybe he's just one of these outlaws, a kidnapper no better than they are! If he is I'll certainly tell him a few things when he meets us!"

She disdainfully pushed away the thought that she might get Bob Orton to intercede in her behalf, provided they met again.

"He'd just laugh at me! The way he looked at me there in the hotel dining-room; he was so sober I was more than half sure he was making fun of me."

But why should he make fun of her? Even in her captivity she was momentarily conscious of her beauty and of the fact that she was very attractively dressed. With a steady and tender hand she smoothed a dusty wrinkle from her apple-green skirt. Then she jumped until the rope that bound her ankles together jerked upward and struck the belly of the horse. From somewhere ahead a rifle had cracked. She saw the sorrel-whiskered outlaw sag in his saddle, roll from it.

"Hell's bells!" the black-bearded one yelled. "Who's that?" He dropped the end of the lead-rope. The sorrel pony already had its back humped because of the tickling pressure of the rope against its belly. Now it arched farther, jerking up its head as the rifle cracked again. Leaning to grab the dragging reins which the outlaw had held along with the lead-rope, Lida got a flash of Slim as he tumbled from his saddle, a flash of a man streaking it across an opening a hundred yards ahead.

The pony was now bucking hard. Lida cried out with pain as her breastbone hit the tall horn of the saddle. She gasped, tried to reach the dragging reins. The pony shied as a man came towards them on a bay horse, firing as he rode. Lida was coherent enough to see Kirk and the black-bearded outlaw streaking it towards an opening between two thickets at the right. They were shooting as they fled.

She felt cold panic and much anger as she realized that her feet were trussed under the sorrel. She could not use them to spur the animal into obedience.

"Well, buck your fool head off!" she cried desperately, and managed to straighten, though the next moment she was jerked backward and jolted terribly as the pony came down on four bunched hooves. She saw the man on the bay flash past, his six-shooter roaring. He yelled at her:

"Stick him, girl! Don't let him pile you!"

"Stick him!" Lida flared, and showed her teeth. "What else can I do when I'm tied to him?"

Kirk and his black-whiskered ruffian had now disappeared over the dip of the hill, but their guns still roared. She saw the unexpected rider streak after them as if he wanted no more gentle finish than to be toppled from his saddle by their bullets.

It had all happened so swiftly, so incredibly, that in half a minute Lida was alone. It took her another half-minute to realize that she was being bucked towards a thicket of cactus and jack-oak.

"Oh, my dress!" she gasped. "If he ever gets me into that!"

Despite the pounding she was enduring she clutched the horn with one hand and leaned to the right, groped again for the reins as they swayed and jerked. She caught them once but they slipped from her fingers. She bared her teeth and panted for breath.

From beyond the hill came the drum of hooves and the echoes of shots. She thought she heard the crashing of brush as if some rider or some riderless horse had torn through it.

The sorrel pony seemed to be animated by some devilish intent, bucking steadily towards the thorny thicket. Each time it hit the ground and rose again the rope dragged across its under side and made it buck more furiously.

Lida was now as angry and desperate as she was frightened and awed. Even in this turbulent state of mind she was not unmindful of the spectacle she made, helpless on the back of a cow horse she could have ordinarily ridden with ease while she raked it from shoulders to flanks with sharp rowels.

She caught at the reins again, dropped them as the sorrel half whirled. From beyond the brow of the hill came echoes, distorted and unreal, as if down there men were doing much erratic shooting.

"Darn you, horse!" Lida panted as she grabbed again. She cried out with pain as the horn hit her chest. "Oh, that rope! If I ever get hold of the man who tied my feet with it, I'll——"

The next moment she wanted to shout with exultation. She had the bridle reins!

But not soon enough. She tried to lean back, to fend branches from her face. There was a rending of cloth, then more rending. She felt a sting of hot pain in her left knee.

There was a little opening in the thicket ahead. She slackened the reins, balanced quickly to the rise of the horse, flipped the divided reins over its head.

"There, you loco son-of-a-gun!" she hissed as she straightened.

Her feet had not left the stirrups. Now, as she braced back and hauled with all her angry, frightened strength, the rope under the pony slid forward and caught against its forelegs. As if this had been a signal, the horse suddenly ceased its bucking, snorted as it jerked up its head.

"You crazy fool!" Lida hissed. "If I had a club I'd hit you between the ears, darn you!"

Then she forgot her anger and fright as she looked down at her skirt. Through slits in the apple-green fabric, white showed. There was a triangle lying back revealing an area of white silken chemise. The end of her pretty scarf dangled in shreds, split when it had caught upon a stubborn, thorny branch.

Lida tried to fight back a surge of tears. She wanted to swear, but set her teeth as she lifted the maimed skirt of the green riding habit. She sucked in a deep, desperate breath as she pulled a long cactus thorn from the soft white flesh of her left knee.

"Ouch!" she murmured on a slow deep breath. She felt weak and wanted to cry as she reined the now obedient sorrel round. There were at least a dozen major tears in her habit, twice as many minor ones. She forgot her paining knee and wondered whether it would have been better to have had a whole dress and been a captive than to be free with her apparel in this condition.

"Oh, I'm half undressed!" she cried and colour came back to her face which, miraculously, had not been scratched. "And if that man comes back he'll see me!"

Out in the clearing Lida forgot her wrecked habit. She paled with horror as she beheld the man with the sorrel beard lying dead upon the ground. He was repulsive yet pitiful as he lay there, twisted and ugly. Close to his left hand lay a Winchester rifle which he had been ready to use when he had been dropped from his saddle.

Not far away lay a lean man with pinched features. His close set blue eyes stared sightlessly at the hot, tinny sky. As if for mutual protection the two riderless horses had come together near the rim of the thicket. "Well!"

Lida faltered. "He wasn't such a bad shot. And he's got guts, too!"

Then she was again conscious of her raiment, once so gorgeous. Now it was a wreck of green and white. Her knee throbbed and burned with pain.

She considered hurrying towards the lazy L. If she did this the man on the bay horse would not see her when she was so torn and ridiculous. She decided the question quickly and with a flash of eyes and lift of chin. "I won't do it! I won't run from him after he's done this for me."

She drew the bridle reins tight, tied their ends about the horn, putting a bow into the pony's neck.

"I ought to break it!" she told the horse. "Stand still, you!"

By bending and twisting she managed to loose the rope from one ankle. Freeing the other was easy enough. She noticed only dully that the cord that had kept her captive was a short length of small cotton rope as she flung it to the grass.

Dismounting, she pulled the reins over the pony's head and dropped them, determined not to be left afoot. As she began to survey the damage to her habit the horse turned its head about and sniffed affectionately at her. She slapped its nose.

"Don't try to make friends with me! Just look at this!"

As if it understood the angry order, the pony sidled round until it looked directly at her. It stuck out its nose and sniffed inquisitively. Lida's eyes flashed and her still-pale lips curled.

"You think it's grass because it's green, do you? Well, it's not!"

The next moment she was contrite. Why should she be cruel to this horse? It was not the fault of the horse that things had happened so fast and furiously. She glanced at the two dead men on the ground, paled again, laid an arm across the neck of the pony as if in this touch she found protection and courage. She tried to smile as the animal sniffed at her skirt.

"Oh, I'll let you eat it if you want to," she half sobbed. "It certainly isn't much good to cover me now." As if it caught only humour in her words the pony flung up its head, snorted violently.

"All right, get it out of your system!" Lida flared. "But I don't think there's anything very funny about this."

She backed away from the friendly and inquisitive horse, surveyed the wreck of the habit again.

"Oh, if I only had a whole package of pins, or a needle and thread!" She looked at the sorrel. "You haven't got them, have you, horse?"

The pony nodded its head solemnly. Lida had to laugh in spite of herself.

"You're a liar! You haven't any more pins and needles and thread than I have."

Spoiled and strong-willed as she was, life on the range had not left Lida unresourceful. She could use cactus thorns to repair her habit, at least to such extent that it would be presentable, though perhaps ridiculous and certainly humiliating. She was about to turn towards the thicket when she became conscious of burning and throbbing. She dropped to her right knee, lifted the skirt. Crimson blood smeared the white flesh.

"Oooh!" she murmured through set teeth. "I'll bet it went in an inch. It feels like it. Well, let it hurt!"

From the end of an eye she caught a movement towards the dip of the hill. She straightened upon her right knee, poised the other to spring erect. There over the rise a rider was coming.

"That's Bob Orton!" Lida gasped, and jumped to her feet. "Oh! He'll have to see me this way!"

She tried to smooth the skirt, to hide some of the tears by placing the flat of her hands over the largest of them, but she felt that this effort was futile. She got a little consolation as she looked intently at the face of the oncoming rider. He was not grinning at her plight. He was not even smiling.

## CHAPTER TEN

SUDDENLY Lida was not certain this was the man she had met in Minton's little hotel. The approaching rider wore batwing chaps, a grey woollen shirt. He wore two six-shooters and carried a rifle in his left hand as if ready for use or very recently used. However he did wear a Stetson like the one Orton had worn. Then she recognised him

fully, and for a moment wondered whether he were laughing at her. She saw him cast a cursory glance at the dead men.

"Run through a sawmill?" he inquired as he flopped a knee about the horn of his saddle.

"I went through that thicket!" she cried angrily, then had to smile. "It was this fool horse. My feet were tied and the reins were down."

He appraised her carefully.

"You did pretty well to get out of it as nearly whole as you did. I'm mighty sorry about your dress, Miss Leighton. It was about the prettiest dress I ever saw on a pretty girl."

"You don't talk," she said a little hesitantly, "like someone who has just killed two men. Did you get the other two?"

He shook his head.

"They outran me and got clean away."

She was not as embarrassed now. After all, why should Joe Leighton's daughter be embarrassed at all? The humiliating part of her experience was that she had ridden into the kidnappers' trap, and then been bucked into the thorn thicket with such disastrous effect. Her lips trembled for an instant as she thought of her new riding habit.

"I am very grateful to you for what you did," she said.

"Well, I'm glad I showed up," he smiled. "They had you a prisoner? I didn't take much time to make sure when I saw you with them."

Lida had to laugh now, partly in sheer relief at her deliverance.

"Did they have me a prisoner? Mr. Orton, were you ever on a strange horse with your feet tied under his belly and the bridle reins down.?"

He shook his head.

"No, but I slept with a rattlesnake once. It was a cold night and he crawled in without my permission. We did'nt fight, but I didn't kiss him next morning when I felt him coiled against my back."

She shuddered, but managed a smile.

"Well, what are we going to do about it?"

Again he appraised her, shook his head sadly.

"It's a total wreck likely, but if we can pull it off the rocks and patch it up it may float you to port."

"You've been a sailor!" Lida cried, taking new interest in him. She had known so many cowboys and ranchers, young and old, that it was interesting to know someone who had not spent all his life on the range.

"I read," Orton corrected. "The bridge of my ship is usually a single-fire cack, though I will ride a Texas saddle if I can't get any other."

He dismounted, regarded her quizzically, and was not unconscious of the picture she made even in the wrecked dress.

"Needle?"

"No!"

"Thread?"

"Of course not!"

"Pins then?"

"Do you suppose," she demanded icily, "that I carry a notion store with me?"

He appraised her much more soberly than he had before.

"I've got a hunch you have a lot of queer notions in your head sometimes, Miss Leighton."

This made her eyes blacken and her chin lift.

"Why should they be queer?"

"Let's not argue about it," he shrugged, "and especially let's not quarrel. We've got to do something about that dress. If it wasn't on you it'd be shameful."

"Thanks," she laughed, and reddened. "But what is there we can do? I'll be darned if I'll appear at the ranch with it on.

The way he grinned made her colour heighten still more. It was as if he were telling her she could not arrive at the ranch without a dress. He asked whether he should ride to Mesa Prieta for another one.

"Oh my goodness no!" she cried almost aghast. "Why, that would let everybody know what a fool I've made of myself! I'll stay here till after dark first."

Orton lifted his eyebrows.

"Did you make a fool of yourself?"

"You know I did. But why didn't you come with me?"

He lifted his brows again, and rubbed a temple in simulated thought.

"Did you ask me to come? In fact didn't you tell me not to?"

"Of course! But you could have insisted upon it!"

"I reckon I don't usually ask a second time, Miss Leighton. As likely you recollect I signified my willingness once."

She looked at him levelly, and was just angry enough to forget that he had saved her from Jack Kirk and his men.

"Yes, I know you said you were willing to come. I should have insisted."

Orton walked to a manzanita, from which he cut a small branch. Lida was puzzled as he began to pare it down with his stock knife. The piece had been whittled to the thickness of a flat quill when she discovered what he was doing. As he apparently gave all his attention to his work she had an opportunity to study him more closely.

"I believe I like him," she mused. "He's different from most of the men I've known. I wonder who and what he is."

Presently he had the bit of hard wood about the size and shape of a large darning-needle. He deftly pointed one end, flattened the other. With the point of the long blade he bored a hole in the flat end, reamed it.

"This will be hard on nice cloth," he said, "but if you don't mind——"

"Hard on nice cloth!" Lida repeated with a little laugh. "I suppose those thorns weren't hard on it. Nothing could make it any worse. And I paid fifty dollars for it!"

"Cheap at the price," he agreed soberly. "I don't know much about dresses, but I do know what combines well with dark blue eyes and hair like yours."

She did not thank him for this compliment, though she appreciated it nevertheless. He was rummaging through his pockets with the swift thoroughness of an overgrown schoolboy.

"No string, no thread, no Home-rule, no nothin'," he grinned. "You know Parnell?"

"I—I don't believe I do."

Then to her surprise he was singing, in a surprising baritone—

"They're hanging men and women
For the wearin' of the green!"

She uttered a silvery laugh, then cried out: "For goodness' sake, don't make any more fun of me!

I can't help it if I like green. That fool horse and those kidnappers!"

"The kidnappers," he drawled, "must have taken to green. I reckon the horse didn't like it so well maybe."

"I still believe you are enjoying this. But I'm not!"

"I enjoy most anything—at times."

"But my dress!" she remonstrated. "What are we going to do about it? We can't sew it with just a needle!"

He suggested that she ravel some of the threads from the wrecked dress.

"Oh, that would take too long," she said impatiently. "I must get home. Besides, there isn't a whole piece of it long enough to leave a thread a foot long. Let me go as I am. I'll face the music."

"It's not always best to be too ready to face the music. Sometimes it has discords in it."

Lida had no reply to this, and wondered angrily whether he referred to her wilfulness. She was conscious more of her throbbing knee than of him as she watched him search the pockets of the dead men. As if he were oblivious of her presence he spread two bandanas on the dry grass, put into them at least two hundred dollars in gold and silver, two knives, two cuts of tobacco, some cigarette papers and Durham. He tied the corners of the bandanas carefully.

"For charity," he declared. "I'll have to get you to tell me who around here needs dinero and so forth."

That was kind and thoughtful, and she liked him for it.

"What's wrong?" he demanded as he looked at her sharply. "You look as if something hurts."

"My feelings," she said wryly. "What's behind those saddles?"

After some trouble he caught the horses the dead bandits had ridden, dropped the bridle reins in order that the animals would stand. In the sacks back of the cantles he found some paper-wrapped parcels tied with white twine. Presently he held half a dozen lengths of the twine in his brown hand.

"I mentioned Parnell," he said. "He's a hot-headed Irishman who's been fighting and elocuting for Home Rule in Ireland for years. He's an eloquent man and smart, and a fighter for what he believes in."

"I don't see where he sits in this game," said Lida, not

much interested. "Let me see if I can thread this manzanita needle."

He took the needle from her, ran an end of twine through the eye, grinned.

"Easier than for a rich man to get into heaven. Double or single?"

"Single of course. It'll take it all to mend the big holes."

"Want me to sew, Miss Leighton?"

"Thank you, I can do it quite well myself!"

Sitting Turk-fashion on the grass she began the mending.

"There's blood on your hand," he accused.

"Ran a cactus thorn into my knee." She did not look up. "This doesn't work so bad, does it?"

"It'd work worse if I was doing it."

She looked up when she heard him stir, saw that he was striding to his horse. After a few moments he returned with a soiled but stout little canvas sack. He squatted upon his heels, fumbled in the sack and brought out a brownish vial, and then much to her surprise, a roll of white bandage.

"Fix it up!" he ordered. "I know from the way you look it hurts."

She said she would attend to her knee after she had finished her mending.

"Right now!" he snapped. "That dress can wait for a few minutes."

Lida's face was pale as she lifted it and once more her eyes were almost black.

"Who's telling me what to do?"

"I am. And you're going to do it pronto."

Their eyes clashed for a moment, hers angry, his twinkling. She laid the improvised needle and the twine upon the grass.

"Very well." She had to be grateful to him, for after all he had done much for her. "What's in that little bottle?"

"Iodine. I made a rule always to carry a little of it with me after this." He rolled up his right sleeve. On the corded upper arm she saw a long red scar. "A man knifed me there. Blood-poison set in. His cuchillo must have been dirty. Since then I've always carried some iodine."

"Are you always expecting to get hurt?" she de-

manded sarcastically, then was contrite. "Oh, I'm sorry I said that. It was rude of me, and ungrateful. You might have been shot—even killed in saving me from those men."

"Maybe," he agreed, and rose. She saw him go to the outlaws' horses and remove saddles, blankets, bridles. She noted with pleasure and higher opinion of him that he studiously kept his back to her while he spread a saddle blanket over each of the dead men, laid a saddle upon each blanket. After he had completed this thoughtful precaution he stood as if he saw something interesting in the east.

"You may come back now!" Lida called.

As he came he saw her deftly drawing the edges of a long tear together with the white twine. He smiled whimsically down at her bare auburn head as she bent over her work. She stopped sewing long enough to hand him the little vial and what remained of the iodine.

"Thanks. It smarted like the devil, but I know it will be all right. It hardly hurts now."

As she resumed her work he squatted on his heels and carefully restored the articles to the little sack, tied its neck.

"The effect isn't half bad," he drawled. "Sort of looks like something embroidered with white."

"It looks," she corrected, as she snapped back her head and laughed, "like hell!"

"Now that you mention it, maybe it does."

After fifteen minutes she jumped to her feet and shook the wrinkles from a fairly presentable skirt.

"Thank you, Mr. Orton," she said with a smile, "I don't know what I would have done without you. My father will see you in Mesa Prieta and settle with you."

He politely corrected her, explaining that he would meet her father at the Lazy L.

"Well, if you insist on going," she conceded as she gave him her prettiest smile, "I can't keep you from it."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Lida was not entirely pleased that Bob Orton had elected to ride on to the Lazy L with her. It was as if he thought she was not capable of taking care of herself. However, there was comfort in his presence. He was interesting

company, and good looking and certainly had the sort of courage a girl could admire. She balanced these favourable thoughts with suspicion, in spite of the knowledge that she should let affairs stand as they were.

"You rode out ahead of me on the trail," she accused after they had travelled half a mile.

"No."

"Then how did you know I would run across those outlaws?"

"I didn't know it."

"It wasn't an accident though, your showing up when you did."

"Well, partly," he told her. "I figured you'd get into trouble, and——"

"So that was it?" she cried as her eyes darkened. "You sneaked out, and—because——"

"I never sneak out of any place, Miss Leighton. Let's have complete understanding on that."

"Should we have an understanding on anything?"

"I think we should."

"Why?"

"Because I'm going to stick around this neck of the woods for a good while and I think we should be friends."

"Oh, I'm sure we should," she said contritely. "I suppose I don't sound very grateful, do I? I wish I hadn't so many sides to my darned nature!"

"The trouble with you," he regarded her squarely, "is that you're trying not to be grateful. But get this. I don't want your plain gratitude. If you want the truth, I'd much rather we had met in a different way, and without all this rescue stuff."

"It was heroic just the same," she murmured as her eyes narrowed.

"On the other hand," he declared, "it was just plain business because it was the only thing to be done under the circumstances."

"Old man Minton told you to ride herd on me!" she flared.

He nodded, smiled.

"Something like that. He gave me instructions about how to ride a circle and strike the Lazy L trail. I might have met you before you had the luck to meet up with those four if I hadn't got lost for a while."

Because he was provoking she tried hard to provoke him but he remained serenity itself.

"Luck? How do you figure it as luck, Mr. Orton?"

"Bob," he suggested soberly.

"No."

"Later?"

"I don't think so. How do you figure it was luck?"

"Why, that's easy. It gave me a chance to rescue a pretty maiden in distress, and the logical outcome would be——"

"I won't do it!" She turned rosy and averted her face.

"Won't do what?" he demanded soberly.

"Kiss you! As I told you, my father will pay you well. I suppose you work for money."

"Who doesn't, in one way or another?"

She could not look at him now. There was something cold, half impersonal in his expression, but nothing unkindly.

"Here's another point we must have an understanding on," he said. "I don't take pay for rescuing pretty girls in green dresses."

Her thick veneer of vanity forced her to smile and flush with pleasure.

"Then if they were plain girls?"

"All girls are plain just as all are pretty," she was informed. "You see the plain ones have the most sense, and that strikes the balance."

Lida wanted to rail out at him. So she was not intelligent, was that what he thought? She looked fixedly at the trail ahead and compressed her lips. Her peace of mind was not enhanced by the knowledge that she had acted and was still acting childishly.

"Do you know as much about cows as you do about girls?" she asked, for she had to say something.

"Just the same," he grinned. "They're both females."

"Oh, I mean about cattle in general! I don't believe you know anything about cattle."

As his horse jogged along he rolled a cigarette, seeming to be interested only in the brown paper and the brown grains of tobacco.

"I've owned thousands of cattle."

"Then you're a buyer?"

He did not reply until he had lit the smoke.

"I'd buy 'em if I could find a bargain. Fact is I'd buy the devil himself if he looked like a bargain."

She wondered what he meant. Did he figure his rescue of her from the outlaws was part of a price he would pay for her?

The trail narrowed and she trotted ahead. Lida tried hard to fight down the rebellious, spoiled spirit she knew was hers. After all, why should they not be friends? She wanted somebody with whose will she could clash.

"Just the same," she promised herself, "I won't marry him no matter what he's done or who he is."

Then with surprise that made her start he said:

"I'm going to be married, Miss Leighton."

"You are?" she cried, and turned to the left as if she had heard a sudden noise in that direction, for she did not want him to see the flush that had leaped to her cheeks. Had he read her very thoughts?

"Yeah," he drawled, "I'm figurin' on it."

She trusted herself to look back now, smiled.

"Why did you tell me?"

"I thought you might be interested."

"Well, that's fine," she managed. "Is she a nice girl?"

"She will be."

"She will be?" Lida queried, wondering what he meant. "Why should you want to marry her if she isn't a nice girl?"

"She'll be nice before we are married," he went on.

She narrowed her lids and her eyes darkened. A twisted little smile came to her lips.

"So that's it, is it? You tame 'em?"

"On the contrary, Miss Leighton. I show them how to tame themselves."

Lida smiled a little derisively.

"Well, well! You must have had a whole corralful of experience."

"Oh yes," he answered, "I've been everything from newsboy to—well, I mighty near hit the millionaire class once."

"In your imagination?"

He smiled as if she had made the correct guess, and she decided he was nothing more than an interesting, adventurous, good-looking cowboy who possessed more than the average courage and who liked to tell big stories about himself, especially to girls.

She reined to the right until her knee touched his as if by accident. When she looked up her eyes were blue and innocent.

"My!" she sighed. "You must be quite a wonderful man, Mr. Orton!"

He regarded her with eyes so impassive that she wondered whether he were even aware of her nearness.

"Yeah," he admitted bluntly, "I am quite a wonderful man in a way."

"What way?" she prompted.

The utter impassivity remained on his sun-browned face.

"That is something," he said confidentially, "that I can't tell anybody but the girl I am going to marry."

She reined her horse away but was not able to hide her jealousy and embarrassment. His reply had been like telling her to mind her own affairs.

"Does the knee still hurt?" he inquired presently.

"Why, yes, it hurts some." She was glad he had changed the subject.

They were beginning to climb now on a trail that wound among rocky knolls and hogback ridges, along rugged little gulleys. Riding ahead, Lida tried to put the man back of her out of her thoughts, or at least to think of him in a way that was strictly impersonal.

She was aware of the laughs and smiles there would be at her expense when the folks at home heard the story of her pretty riding-habit. She was aware, too, of the horror and anger there would be when she told of the attempted kidnapping. She could visualize her father's rage. He would probably roar at her and tell her what a fool she was, though he seldom lost his temper where she was concerned. She paled when she thought of the ordeal through which she would have to pass. It would be no less because of the man with her. Her father would roar out his gratitude to Bob Orton.

But after all why should she endure this ordeal of laughter and meaning smiles and real rage? She glanced back. Orton had his head bent.

Where the trail widened she slowed her horse so that he might overtake her.

"Would you mind doing me a favour?" she asked with a hopeful smile upon her lips.

"Anything short of murder or horse-stealing."

"Oh, will you?"

He nodded.

Then as she told him what she wanted his face became grave. She was quick to note this change of expression.

"You said you'd do it!"

"Yes, but somehow lying comes in the same class with horse-stealing, Miss Leighton."

Her chin lifted.

"Very well! That's all right. It wasn't much of a favour anyway."

Because he seemed uninterested and unimpressed she spurred ahead. Behind her Bob Orton smiled drolly as he watched her stiff erectness in the saddle. This could no more hide her supple grace than could the torn and patched habit.

"Mad as a whole nest of hornets," he mused. "But I can imagine how she'll feel when she gets home and has to own up. Maybe a little owning up will do her good. She's had her own way a lot more than is good for her."

They were on better trail within fifteen minutes, and Orton saw about him little patches of chaparral and rocky jumbles intergrown with brush. Perhaps twenty miles ahead was a ragged line of ruddy cliffs cut by dark, sheer-walled canyons.

"The Colorado Cliffs are the eastern border of the Lazy L," Lida explained stiffly as she turned in her saddle. She could not remain cold to the man who had come to her rescue so opportunely. "The range runs for forty miles to north and south."

"I'll take a look at it," he said, and saw that already her horse was upon a very narrow grassy level. He touched his bay with the spurs, and had its head opposite her cantle when out of the silence came the crack of a rifle. Even before he had time to realize the meaning of the report Orton felt his horse shiver. The next moment it was pitching forward on buckling knees. Orton jerked his rifle from its scabbard as he leaped free, and hit the ground crouched. He straightened, saw the girl's pale face turned towards him, saw the fright in her wide eyes. He slapped her sorrel pony violently upon the rump.

"Get over the rim!" he rasped. "Get over!"

"But you?" Lida panted as she held the sorrel with taut reins.

"I'm staying here!" he barked at her. "For God's sake, get going!"

This time he hit the sorrel with his hat, and despite the taut reins it jumped, jerking the girl back in the saddle. Her head was turned and she gasped with horror as she heard the dull thud of a bullet into the horse which was now kicking and thrashing upon the ground. Then she had to look at the steep trail, but before she did she saw Bob Orton drop as if he had been shot.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

PETE NASON planned to start from Verde immediately, to take advantage of the coolness of the night. He got his horse, but as he mounted and rode away from the livery stable where he had had the animal well fed, it headed for the hitching-rack in front of the Longhorn Saloon, where it had been left many times.

Nason had been fighting an urge to gamble before he left for Arizona. Now he grasped the action of the horse as a good omen. It meant that if he gambled he would win. What was the hurry? Furthermore, a hundred dollars was not enough for such a long trip. There might develop circumstances calling for much more money. Besides, as a gentleman gambler he should have surplus funds. There was no telling when he might encounter the opportunity to get into a profitable game.

As Pete started to enter the saloon he saw Cass Harden sauntering up the street, apparently without purpose. Harden, tall and slender and immaculately dressed, was a professional gambler, such a gambler as Pete Nason himself yearned to be. Now Pete was gripped by a burning desire to break Harden. The gambler was reputed to always have at least a thousand dollars ready to take.

"Howdy, Cass!"

"Howdy, Pete."

The lack of friendliness or interest caused Pete's face to darken.

"You must be feelin' sick this evenin'," he sneered.

"I am feeling exceptionally well," said Harden.

"Good enough for a little game?"

Harden surveyed the rancher's son as he would have appraised a hand of five cards.

"I seldom indulge in small games," he said with an air of dismissal.

"Well, who the hell said anything about a small game?" Nason sneered. "I don't like a little game and you know it."

"I wasn't aware of it," Harden disagreed, and started on.

"Why, you high-toned——!" Pete sneered as he blocked the gambler's way. "I got a hundred dollars as says I can skin your hide off!"

Harden backed up a pace and though his hot temper urged him to grab the short pistol from the holster under his left arm, he allowed his hands to dangle and kept his handsome face impassive.

"Well, how about it?" Nason demanded sarcastically. "I got a hundred as says I can take your hide off."

"Why not keep your hundred then, Nason?" Harden asked. "You may need it."

Nason loosed some contemptuous profanity and curled back his upper lip until his moustache twisted.

"White liver!" he said.

"Not exactly," Harden disagreed. "I have never seen a game I feared."

"Then what the hell are you scared of me for?"

"I'm not," the gambler corrected as his face blanched a little, "scared of you, Nason. If you insist on a game I shall oblige you."

"Well, I sure insist on her!" declared Nason profanely, and stalked into the saloon, gun swaying, and spurs jingling.

Harden followed with his usual slow dignity. It was not that he had scruples against winning money in hundred-dollar lots. He had more tricks with cards than the average dog has fleas, but was seldom called upon to use them. Now he thought he could play for an hour or two and play squarely, and quit the game a hundred dollars ahead.

"Have a drink, Cass?" Pete asked, wanting to prove his equality and fraternity with the man who lived well and worked not at all.

"Yes, I'll take a toddy," accepted Harden.

They drank, Nason with suppressed nervousness, Harden leisurely. Pete led the way to the deserted pokertable at the rear of the room.

"Fetch us a new deck, Sam!" Pete called to the bartender, as he took a chair facing the door to live up to the traditions of a gunman. The play had little more than begun before some of the patrons in the place sauntered back to watch.

"Pete, he sure tackled a big bear," one ventured.

"Like 'em big," Nason grunted, keeping his hat down over his eyes, piling his five gold double-eagles with his left hand. He had changed to gold the dirty paper money he had received from his father, adding ten dollars of his own to replace the ten that Rosita had taken. Gold was much more impressive.

After the first two hands, which each man used to test his opponent, Nason began to win. Within an hour he had over two hundred dollars in money and chips in front of him.

"Show this——he can't play poker!" he told himself exuberantly. He touched the pistol he had surreptitiously laid across his legs at the beginning of the game.

"Durned if you ain't takin' his measure, Pete," growled the saloon-keeper.

"Sort of looks like he is," Harden agreed smilingly. "No cards, Nason."

Pete looked up from his studious appraisal of table and cards.

"Huh? You ain't drawin'?"

"No cards this time," Harden said politely.

Half an hour later Pete was down to forty dollars. He was savage and nervous now, lacking entirely the cool sardonic calm the real gambler seemed to have in taunting, unlimited measure. Pete's eyes were narrowed and he looked more intently than ever at the table, his money, and the cards he held close-reefed when they were dealt to him. He bet twenty dollars on a pair of aces and lost when Harden turned up kings and jacks.

"Of all the damned luck!" Nason swore. He rose, tramped round the table, sat down.

"Don't let yourself get excited, Pete," Harden advised paternally. "It spoils the fine points of the game."

"Huh! Me excited?" Nason laughed. "I just wanted to change my luck. My deal, Cass."

Pete shuffled the cards with swift thoroughness while he watched his opponent from under the brim of drawn-down Stetson. He was now gripped entirely by nervous fear. He had agreed to go to Arizona and kill a man, and he had to have more than twenty dollars to make the long ride. He could hear the profanity of old Jurd's wrath if the latter were asked for more money in advance. Further more, there would be no pleasure at all in confessing that he had played poker and lost.

As he dealt the cards with fingers he tried to make swift and nimble, Pete was conscious of the heavy pistol on his lap. He felt much better after he had won seven dollars. He would play more cautiously now. That tramp around the table had changed his luck. He looked at the sack of coin and the neatly smoothed banknotes before Harden as he slid cards across the table.

His suspicion began to grow as he watched the flash of Harden's soft white fingers. He looked at his hand. It held nothing higher than a nine-spot. He flung it contemptuously to the table.

"Pass! Lemme try my hand toward somethin' better."

Harden passed the next hand, took the deal.

Pete considered tramping round the table again. No, he would not do that. Cass Harden was the most successful gambler in town and he did not seem to take stock in superstitions.

Thumbing up the corners of his cards, Pete tried to suppress his exultation and look glumly disappointed. He had seen the marks of two aces and two kings. Harden lifted his five cards, looked at them, laid them face down before his money.

Again Nason thumbed up the corners of his cards. He scowled and seemed to hesitate, though excited certainty urged him to bet. With slitted eyes he appraised the gambler across the table.

"Your play, Nason," Harden prompted as he thought of a better game down the street.

For the third time Nason bent up the corners of his five cards. He seemed to study them though he knew them as if they lay face up on the green cloth—two kings, two aces, the three of diamonds.

"Go you the whole pile!" he sneered as he shoved all his money and chips towards the middle of the table.

Harden's long fingers sorted money from chips and counted both. He matched chips with chips, money with money. He held the deck loosely in his left hand.

"One card," said Pete.

With agile thumb Harden slipped the top card from the pack. Nason grabbed it, cupped it in his hands, laid it with the four he had kept.

Putting down what remained of the deck, Harden selected two cards from his hand, tossed them with the one Nason had discarded. He thumbed two cards from the top of the deck. Picking up these cards he glanced at them, lifted his face.

"Is it a showdown, Pete?"

"All I got!" snarled Nason. "Wish I had a hundred more!"

With savage, nervous hand he showed his two pairs, looked hard across the table, saw Harden turn up three queens. Pete felt a sickening numbness in the pit of his lean stomach, felt it race to burning fire in his brain. His teeth bared.

"You crooked——!" he roared. "I saw you palm that extra queen!"

Before the tricky gambler could flash a right hand to his shoulder holster Pete Nason's forty-five roared. For a brief moment incredulity erased all the other emotions from Cass Harden's face. Then he sagged, slid sideways, kicked over his chair as he dropped lifeless to the floor.

By this time Pete Nason was raking coin and paper money from the table with his left hand while he held the cocked six-shooter in right. His teeth were bared now in a continuous snarl and there was savage exultation and self-righteousness in his head. He had caught a crooked gambler cheating and had killed him.

"You hombres keep out of this!" he commanded as he sidled towards the door. "I ain't got no mess with you-all!"

The three men at the bar turned their backs to it. Sam Glass laid both hands significantly on the bar.

"The —— needed what he got!" Nason declared as he neared the doors. "I caught him cold-deckin' me with three queens!"

"It was your game, Pete," the bartender said impassively.

"Us, we sure didn't hold no cards in 'er," added one of the men backed against the bar.

In the swinging doors Nason turned, again advised the four to take no part in the trouble.

"I don't want to have to drill anybody else!" he said. "I don't shoot nobody but men as tries to do me wrong. Adios!"

Pushing open the doors, he was confronted by running men who were coming to learn what the single shot had meant. Nason waved them back with his gun so effectively that two of them almost toppled backward. Pete regarded them with murder in his slitted eyes as they demanded to be told what the shooting had been about.

"Go in and see for yourselves!" he snarled. "I just drilled Cass Harden, the crooked ——!"

"You kilt Cass?" a man ejaculated.

"If you don't believe it go in and take a look for yourself!" Pete growled again as he made for his horse.

Before a man could stop him Pete was in his saddle and thundering out of the dark village. Ahead of him, under the glittering stars, the wide, open range stretched all the way to Arizona. Strangely, however, he did not ride in that direction, but took the familiar road to his father's ranch in the Mesquite Bottoms.

Swaying rhythmically to the motion of the running horse, he tried to count the money he had in his pockets, roughly approximating the denominations of the paper currency from his memory of what Harden had had before him on the table.

"Must be more than three hundred," he told himself with satisfaction. "Wish I'd took time to go through that——'s pockets. Well, he played his last crooked game and he didn't cash in for dinero or chips."

Then as he galloped between thickets of prickly-pear and mesquite and scattered jack-oak Pete Nason became aware that there might soon be an avenging mob on his trail. After all, Cass Harden had been a gentleman, at least in appearance.

"I sure ought to light out for Arizona," Pete told himself. Despite this belief he kept to the crooked road, travelling it as surely as though the sun shone brightly upon it.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

NOT for long was Pete Nason terrorized by fear of a pursuing mob. To show his disdain he reined to a trot, to a walk. Why should he be afraid? He knew every hiding place from the Pecos to the Nueces, from Fort Summer to the Rio Grande.

Then he recalled that he did not need to hide out. He was going to Arizona. That was too far for any avenging mob to travel.

He thought of turning westward now, but there persisted in his brain a determination to go home first. He meant to prove to his father that he had had the courage to kill, and especially to tell him he had killed a crooked gambler.

He drew the pistol that had snuffed out Cass Harden's life, fumbled for his knife. He replaced the weapon in its holster, deciding he could do a better job of carving a notch in daylight.

It was approaching midnight when he neared the ranch. His accustomed eyes traced the blurs of its buildings in the darkness. After putting his horse in a corral he turned towards the ramshackle house. He was within ten yards of its front door when out of the darkness a gruff voice challenged :

"Who's there? Speak up or I'll fill you full of buckshot!"

Domingo Bastilla, who had little to do except loiter about the streets, took the news to Rosita. Her dark eyes widened until each of them held the reflection of the candle, and she turned ashen pale. Her hands flew to her bosom.

"No, no, Domingo! This cannot be true!"

The old Mexican assured her it was true. He said there was a lot of excitement up town.

"But they will hang him!" cried the horror-stricken girl. "They will use the rope on his neck! Señor Harden he was a very rich man!"

Bastillo said scornfully that Harden had merely been a gringo who had earned an easy and luxurious living by dishonest gambling.

"But that makes no difference!" Rosita panted.

"He was rich and he was liked by the men in this pueblo and they will use the rope on my Pedro!"

Domingo soberly reassured her. They could not use a rope on Pete Nason unless they caught him. Amazement again widened her dark eyes.

"He is gone," said the old Mexican, "to where they do not know, but they think to the rancho of his padre."

Again the girl cried out with horror. If Pedro had gone to his father's ranch the avenging mob would follow him. She herself must find a horse and ride to warn him. Madre de Dios, what pain and yet what glory it was to be in love! A moment later she was neither so frightened nor so appalled. Pete was doubtless on his way west and riding fast at this very moment, putting miles between himself and Verde.

"To the rancho he has not gone!" she declared.

"And how do you know this?" Bastilla wanted to know.

Rosita pondered. Should she confess what she knew? Her heart was bursting with love and triumph. They should not hang the man she loved, who had doubtless planned this flight before he had shot the fine, handsome gambler who had deserved shooting anyway. However, Domingo was an old friend and almost her own godfather.

"I know," she said, and hesitated. She leaned close to the old Mexican's wrinkled ear. "To Arizona Pedro has gone, Domingo. That is why they will not find him at the rancho of his padre, amigo mio."

The girl, whose shiftless American father was little more than half civilized and whose Mexican mother was less so, was not shocked because the man she loved had done murder. By this deed he had displayed courage that appealed to the savage in her own nature. What frightened her was that Pete Nason might be hanged.

When Bastillo demanded explanation she told him Nason had gone to Arizona to attend to some business for his father.

"Of this you are very sure, no, Rosita?"

"I am more than sure! Did Pedro himself not tell me this very evening? He is riding all the way to Arizona to collect the dinero which is owed to Jurd Nason by another man."

Domingo pondered for a moment, then uttered a triumphant :

"Hah! But tell me, querida, how will the rascal come back with all this money? He will not dare to come back here to Verde, for he will know he will be hanged, by the neck for the murder of Cass Harden. As I have told you, there is much talk and many threats already in la Calle Principal."

Rosita did not waste a moment in worry over how the collected money was to be taken to old Jurd. What chilled her heart was the fear that Pete Nason would not come back. How could he come back with the certainty of summary death staring at him from every foot of the ugly and drab main street of the village?

"Madre de Dios!" she whispered as she pressed tense hands to her bosom. "To him I will have to go!"

She felt the crinkle of paper and remembered it was made by the scrap on which she had written the name of the town to which Nason was riding in order to collect the money that was owed to his father. She would slip away and leave immediately for Mesa Prieta. Pedro would want her there. He would need her there, now that he could not return to Verde.

Drumming in her heart and brain was the command that she protect her man to the limit, whether it be by force or cunning. He was the man she loved, the man she would always love. She was beginning to remember that old Domingo was something of a meddler and a gossip. Didn't he always bring her the news, important and unimportant?

"I am not so sure of this business, amigo mio," she now said craftily. "It is not entirely as I have told you. Only a little while ago did Pedro himself tell me it would be necessary for him to return to el rancho to talk some more about this money business with his padre. To a certainty do I know he has ridden to the ranch!"

Illiterate though he was Domingo always did his own deciding as to how much of a story to believe.

"Sí," he agreed. "To el rancho he will go. And now it is long past the time for an old and honest man like myself to be in bed. May I hope that you sleep well and happily, Rosita?"

"Oh yes!" she faltered, and was glad that he was

going. She listened until she could no longer hear his shuffling footsteps. She saw him merge with the adobe of his own casa fifty yards away. Then she clasped her hands and lifted her trustfully beautiful face to the stars.

"I will go to him! He will want me. He will need me far out in Arizona!"

Her mother was sleeping inside the casa. Her father, as usual more than half drunk, had returned from his work before dark, had eaten, drunk mescal and dropped into a sodden sleep. Rosita sat down on a rickety bench beside the dark doorway, braced her supple back against the dried-mud wall. After all, should she leave at once for Arizona?

She had managed to save a few precious dollars, and she had the ten she had taken from Pete Nason to buy a ring. She could buy a ticket entitling her to ride on the new railroad. She forgot murder and remembered only love as she warmed and thrilled to the prospect of riding in one of the wonderful new coaches with a great snorting juggernaut of locomotive far ahead riding to Pedro, who would need her.

"It will be the most wonderful thing in my life!" she said aloud, and laughed softly. Then she was very solemn. "But it will not be as great or as wonderful as my love for him. When a woman loves a good man there is nothing greater."

She knew that if she travelled on the train she would travel fast; that Pedro, on horseback, would travel more slowly. She tried to reconcile the difference in the time of their arrivals.

"I know!" she breathed at last. "I know what I will do. I will wait for his letter. Surely he will send me la carta telling me when to come. He may even send me the collected money that I may pay it honestly to his padre who needs it so much, walking as he does with one foot in the grave and the other very near its rim."

She folded her hands against her crimson dress and her eyes filled with tears.

"Ah!" she whispered. "It is muy mal when an old man, he has to die of some slow sickness!"

Then she was mentally comparing Jurd Nason's dragging death with the swiftness of Cass Harden's passing. Her pretty lips curled, and the starlight was reflected from

her black eyes that had suddenly become cold and cruel and disdainful.

"Hah! What better could he expect when he played cards dishonestly! Proud I am of my Pedro because he killed this dishonest man!" She snapped her fingers and her smile was cold and derisive. "Of what these gringos think I do not care!"

Then she sighed again and her heart was heavy with loneliness.

"It will be such a long, long time until I see him again and he tells me he loves me! Each day shall I wait for his letter, and each day shall I pray for him to the Virgin!" Then for a moment her face was distorted with jealousy. "Mother of God! If another girl he finds and loves away out there in Arizona——" She hid her face with her hands but her ears were uncovered, and with them she thought she could catch the muffled echoes of many loud voices in the direction of the main part of the village.

Domingo Bastilla did not enter his dark casa. He skirted it and picked his way along the border of a thicket of mesquite and prickly-pear. Thus by a circuitous route he reached the main part of the town. As he had feared, there were many men grouped in the street near the saloon where Cass Harden had been killed. They were being harrangued by a tall fellow with a florid face and beard. Domingo wormed his way through the excited crowd the stiff soles of his sandals making little puffs of dust.

"What you want Domingo?" demanded Bill Wainwright as he ceases exhorting. "You want to pull on a rope?"

Bastilla grinned apology and said he had no desire to pull on a rope.

"You might as well, greaser," put in a man. "There ain't no denyin' as how Cass was crooked, but he was straight as a string compared with Pete Nason, durn him!"

"And what's more," shouted someone else, "Cass, he acted like a gentleman and sure lived like one, and Pete ain't never been nothin' better'n white trash."

"He's a cold-blooded killer!" yelled a cowboy.

"He don't deserve nothin' better'n bein' hung!"

Bastilla would really have liked to have pulled on a rope whose other end was about Pete Nason's neck, if only to save Rosita from the unhappiness he feared was to be hers.

Instead of voicing this desire he imparted the news he had brought.

"You say Pete's headed for Arizona?" Wainwright demanded as he glared at the old Mexican. "Where'd you learn this, Domingo?"

Bastilla, warmed by the prospect of frustrating this romance, said his information had come from Rosita.

"What? From that greaser wench?" a man snarled. "She ain't——"

"She's to be trusted!" corrected Wainwright. "There ain't anything wrong with that girl except she's half Mex and durned purty, which makes all the white men run after her!"

"Of a certainty!" Domingo declared with rising indignation. "Rosita is a good girl even if she does love this worthless gringo. No girls there are with the better heart."

"Aw, durn her!" a man growled. "Tell us how you know this here Nason lit out for Arizona."

Men, ready to follow a leader, crowded in to learn what the old Mexican knew until their press against him all but pushed him off his feet.

The belief that some avenging friend of Cass Harden had outridden him and by a circuitous route reached here first hit Pete Nason like a bullet. His hand clutched the butt of his six-shooter, but relaxed when he realized it was his father's voice he had heard.

"Who are you?" Jurd demanded again. "Speak up or I'll fill your durned skin full of buckshot!"

"Aw, it's just me, pap. It's just Pete!"

There was a silence as the heavy old muzzle-loader sagged in Jurd's hands. His amazement gave place to rage.

"What you doin' back here?" he shrilled. "Didn't I pay you to start for Arizona on business for me? You come into this house and let me take a look at you, drat your worthless skin!"

When a candle had been lit Pete smiled ironically. His father, in soiled underclothes and heavy cowhide boots, looked like some dead scarecrow except for his burning eyes and the jaws which worked hard on a cud of tobacco.

"You lost that hundred I paid you in advance!" Jurd swore. "If you have you gotta ride to Arizona even if

I gotta rob to pay your way, Pete! Tell me, durn you, did you lose that hundred?"

While Pete was contemptuously putting coin and paper money on the littered table his mother came into the room, making no sound with her bare feet. Her streaked and stringy hair draped about her sallow face and fell upon her nightgown.

"Oh, Pete!" she gasped. "Where on earth did you get all that money?"

"He's been gamblin' again," snarled Jurd. "And maybe for onct he had a streak of luck."

Pete looked up, a sneer of triumph taking some of the innate physical handsomeness from his face.

"I killed Cass Harden," he said as if he had shot a coyote. "He cheated me and I plugged him."

"You kilt Cass Harden?" his mother screamed. "Why, he was a high-toned gambler and a gentleman, Pete!"

"He was a damned crook!" Pete corrected. "And when I found out he was cheatin' me I let him have it. I just wanted to ride by and tell you about it so's you'd get it straight, Pap."

"Then you tell me about it, and tell me kerrect!" ordered Jurd Nason as his black eyes blazed from their deep sockets, though he leaned wearily upon the shotgun.

Nancy Nason interrupted in awe and anguish, but Jurd silenced her with a curse and she cowered back against the wall. When Pete had finished his short and feelingless story Jurd groaned and laid the shotgun on the tattered couch.

"And here I am a-dyin' on my feet, and I gotta git out in the middle of the night and drive to town and git you out of more trouble!"

"And I'll be headin' for Arizona to tend to that business," said Pete.

"No you won't!" Jurd roared as all his old strength seemed to return to him for a brief moment. "You'll stay right here till I see how feelin's runnin' against you in Verde! You take a hoss and some grub and go down into the Wildcat Breaks and wait till I fetch word to you. Them men in Verde might decide to foller you to Arizona. Cass Harden, he had friends."

"And we uns is just poor folks!" wailed Pete's mother. She began to shuffle towards the kitchen. "I'll

fix' you some vittels to take with you, Pete. We cain't let you starve down there in them breaks while you wait for your pappy to come with word."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

About noon of the following day Jurd Nason forced his bay mule into the broken country to south of the ranch. The sun beat down with great ferocity, and Jurd cursed prodigiously, not forgetting to include his son in his tirade.

"Pete! Where the hell air you?" he called.

There was a cautious answer. Presently Jurd rode the mule through a thicket where a fire curled up smoke lazily. Pete lay stretched on the grass near it, in the shade of some tall mesquite.

"Wal, here you are!" his father grunted.

"And a fine place for a feller like me to have to be!" Pete sneered.

Jurd slid from the saddle but refused to sit down. He clung stubbornly to the horn for support. He looked even now as if he sat on the edge of the grave with both feet dangling in, but got no word or look of sympathy from his son.

"Well, what'd you find out, Pap?"

"Found out you orter be hung!" snarled Jurd. "You didn't have no proof of how Cass Harden cheated you!"

Pete declared that he had seen Harden cheating, that any man who said differently was a liar.

"I ain't arguin' about that!" growled the old man. "I come to tell you as how the excitement agin you has cooled off some in town. Them men as was figurin' on stringin' you up are sayin' as how you ain't wuth chasin' all the way to Arizony."

Pete Nason got to his feet and stood lithe and graceful. This disparagement of his character made his anger rise hot. He thought of riding into Verde to kill a few of the men who had said he was not worth following.

After all, what was the need of going to Arizona? He had money now. He could hang about where he was, or better yet go to one of the nearby cattle towns and wait till the resentment against him had subsided entirely. Old

Jurd was quick to read the hopeful look on his son's face.

"I ain't sayin' for sure them men in town won't hang you, Pete. I'm just tellin' you as how feelin' agin you has cooled off for a little."

"Did you happen to see Rosita, Pap?"

"That wuthless wench? What'd I want to see her about?"

Pete looked momentarily crestfallen.

"I figured she might have somethin' to tell you."

"Wouldn't want to hear it if she did! You'll be durned lucky to git rid of that wench, but then it won't make no difference if you do. You'll find another one of the same stripe in Arizony."

Pete's head snapped erect and his eyes smouldered as he said Rosita was a good girl.

"There ain't a thing against her!"

"There ain't? Say, her paw ain't wuth the powder to blow his head off."

"She can't help that."

"Yeah, and her maw is a durned greaser."

"And she can't help that either. I don't give a damn whether you like her or not, I'm goin' to marry her."

Among Jurd Nason's remote ancestors had been proud men and women. Because he himself was all white he believed he was of higher caste than anybody of mixed bloods. Still, there was no occasion to argue this point. When Pete got out to Arizona he would forget the pretty Rosita, and maybe the next girl he fell in love with would be all white. To Jurd, no Mexican, even if he were pure Spanish, was white.

"Now, you looky here, you durned whelp!" he ordered. "This here kentry ain't goin' to be safe for you for a long time. Even if Cass Harden was crooked like you say, he stood high in Verde. Liked him myself, durned if I didn't, 'cause when he spoke to me he done it as an equal, Pete. Oh, there's still hot talk agin you, but I managed to convince them as wanted to string you up that you'd lit out for Arizony. You gotta light out now."

Pete did not reply but stood sullen. He had more than three hundred dollars. Why should he head for Arizona? As he tried to answer this question he pictured a blood-mad mob with himself as its victim.

"Now you looky here, Pete," the old man went on. "You ack like you was hurt or somethin'. Durn your wuthless skin, it's me that's hurt! I rid all night and to-day and I ain't had a wink of sleep and you know I'm a sick man anyhow. I told enough lies for you to-day to keep me in hell for a hundred years. Besides, I'm sick, I tell you!"

Pete studied the former giant who now resembled a frame of bones with parchment skin stretched over it, except for the burning, vital eyes. Pete smiled, shrugged.

"I'm sorry, Pap."

"Like hell you are!" Jurd disagreed. "You never was sorry for nobody but yourself. You never think of nobody but ourself, Pete. Low-down as that greaser gal is, she'll be durned lucky 'cause you can't marry her. Now you be at the ranch at mid-night to-night. I ain't too durned sure some of them men from town won't be out to-day to see whether I lied about you. You'll be there?"

"Yeah," Pete answered sullenly.

Indomitable will dragged Jurd into the saddle. As he reached home he saw his wife standing in the doorway of the paintless and porchless house. There was relief upon her pinched face.

"Jurd, you don't know what happened!" she cried. "You hadn't been gone more'n two hour when Bill Wainwright and four men rid up here and asked to see Pete."

The old man's eyes actually twinkled and the smile that came to his bluish lips made them grotesque.

"Did they find him?" he cackled, and bit off a cud from a piece of plug.

"Naw, 'course they didn't. You see Pete?"

"Yeah, I seen the wuthless ——," said Jurd as he slid to the ground. "Fotch that likker jug, Nancy."

She brought the jug. Jurd wallowed his fresh cud to a safe spot under a sunken cheek and rinsed the tobacco from the rest of his mouth with raw "moonshine." He took a long drink, sighed. He sat down on the doorstep with the jug between his knees as he absently watched his wife unsaddle the mule. The animal shook itself, then shambled toward the leaky watering-trough that was supplied by a windmill that squealed and squeaked whenever the wind blew.

"Ain't it turrible Pete's got to go clean to Arizony?" whined Nancy Nason.

"Orter have to go clean to hell!" returned Pete's father as he took another drink.

"But ain't you got no feelin' for our boy?" she begged.

"He don't deserve no feelin'!" Jurd replaced the jug between his knees. "Fotch me some quinine, Nancy. Durn it, this likker don't seem to have no power."

She came with a small can and a spoon. Jurd opened his cavernous mouth, dumped quinine into it. He washed it down with whisky and resumed the chewing of his cud. He spat copiously.

"Gimme some, Jurd," she said. "I felt a tinge of agger all day."

He let her lift the heavy jug after she had dumped perhaps ten grains of quinine into her mouth. She rinsed it with whisky, swallowed. She groaned as she set the jug back between his knees.

"What's Pete goin' to Arizony for, Jurd?"

"On some business for me, durn it!" he grunted angrily. As he surveyed her he mentally compared her with Jane Elwood, the girl he had loved, the girl Joe Leighton had won and married. He felt his hate for Leighton grow until it was a hundred times hotter than the whisky that seemed to sear his stomach.

"If Pete don't kill that ornery——," he told himself, "I'll go out to Arizony and do it myself!"

"Jurd," his wife insisted in her whining voice, "what's Pete goin' to Arizony for?"

"None of your durned business! He's goin' out there to do somethin' for me, and that's all you need to know! Take this here jug and put 'er away."

During the afternoon Pete Nason remained in the clearing. He followed the shade as the heat kept him bathed in sweat. Red-bugs pestered him.

Heretofore he had thought of the glamour and the glory of being a hunted man. Now he failed to find these things in it. He considered cutting across country to Verde to see Rosita, to defy the men who would hang him. As the sun sank lower and the air cooled a little he found himself thinking more clearly.

"There's one thing I'm goin' to do when I get out of

this," he promised himself profanely "I'm goin' to be a man like Cass Harden, damn him!"

As he lay and smoked cigarette after cigarette he pictured the now dead gambler. Outwardly Harden had been a polite and polished gentleman. He had worn expensive clothes that had fitted him well. His speech and manners had been excellent.

"If he could do it so can I!" Pete declared aloud and with an oath. "I got as much sense as he ever had. From now on I'm goin' to begin learnin' things like he knowed. Hell, I ain't goin' to hide out all the time like a durned thievin' greaser."

Impatience and egotistical belief in himself made him leave his hide-out before sunset. He rode up to the ranch-house while a candle still burned inside it.

"What you doin' here at this time?" Jurd roared at sight of him. "Didn't I tell you to wait till midnight? Come on in!"

Pete swaggered in, disdainful and cynical. He ignored the tears of pain and pleasure in his mother's eyes.

"Oh, Pete. I'm awful glad you're back!"

"He's durned lucky he wasn't here this afternoon," sneered Jurd. "Pete, while I was out there talkin' to you Bill Wainwright and four other fellers from town was here lookin' for you, your maw says."

"They sure was!" Nancy Nason agreed. "And I told 'em, I did, that I'd swear on a whole stack of Bibles that I hadn't seen hide or hair of you, Pete, for the last three days."

"I sure wish I'd been here then!" Pete boasted. "I'd give them five somethin' they didn't come for."

"Stop your braggin'!" Jurd ordered. "They'd kilt you or you'd had to kill them. Now you listen to me while I tell you what you gotta do. Set down!"

Pete shrugged and remained standing to prove that he did not have to take orders. His mother sank to the threadbare couch and cupped her pointed chin in blue-veined hands while her watery eyes held on her son.

"Pete," commanded Jurd after he had delivered final instructions that cunningly veered round disclosing the real and sinister purpose of Pete's mission, "You leave most of that money here with me. I'll take care of it for you."

"It's my dinero!" Pete refused as he braced back his wide shoulders and moved a hand suggestively towards the handle of a Colt. "I made it and I intend to keep it."

"Then keep it!" snarled Jurd. "But see to it as how you tend to this business for me direct when you git to Arizony!"

"I'll tend to it," Pete drawled, and shrugged again. "I'll tend to it pronto, and don't you worry about that."

The flickering candlelight showed a little softness in the old man's eyes.

"So long as you got more money'n you need, Pete, you might as well give your maw thirty or forty dollars. There's fixin's she needs bad."

Pete grudgingly handed her five dollars. Her eyes welled with tears of love and appreciation as her hands clutched the five-dollar banknote, the most money in one piece that she had ever owned.

"Pete, you're a awful good son."

"Aw, don't say anything about it," he shrugged and wondered whether Cass Harden would have said it this way. "I'd like to give you more, Maw, if I could spare it."

Jurd's eyes were contemptuous, his bluish lips curling back from yellowed teeth.

"Now git ready and git goin'!" he ordered.

"There ain't no tellin' when some of them fellers from town will be out here again lookin' for you. Don't want to see you hung till you tend to that business for me out in Arizony."

"Oh, you don't want him to git hung a-tall, Jurd!" Nancy Nason wailed. "That ain't a good word to send him away from home with!"

The old man looked at her as he looked at his son. He shrugged a shoulder that had once been powerful enough to move an ox from its path.

"He'll git hung sooner or later," he prophesied, "but I want to make sure he tends to that business of mine first. I can't die happy till that's done, Nancy. Now, Pete, you git goin'. You send me word as soon as you've tended to that little matter right."

"I'll send you word, Pap. I'll write you a letter to Verde."

About an hour later Pete was riding through the night. As he travelled he thought less and less of the pretty and trusting girl who was doubtless dreaming of him at this very moment, and more of the glamour and romance that lay ahead under the western stars. That afternoon he had carefully carved one notch on the handle of a six-shooter. He would cut others if men got in his way.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

LIDA turned her head as the sorrel pony leaped over the rim. She saw Bob Orton falling.

"Oh!" she cried. "Oh they've killed him!"

She leaned back and hauled upon the reins with all her strength, but the tired horse, frantic because of the shots, the slap and the commanding words, could not be stopped until it reached a bench some fifty yards from where the steep descent had begun.

Lida tensed in the saddle, listened. There was only silence, silence that was broken by no shots but by the beating of her own heart and the snorting of the sorrel pony. Then came the crack of a rifle. She cried out with horror:

"They have come to finish it! How did they get there?" She whirled her horse about, grabbed for her pistol, but sickened when she felt nothing. She hazily remembered that the men who had kidnapped her had taken her gun and belt. She spurred towards the beginning of the sharp climb, but had not reached it when three other shots crashed the silence. She hauled the pony to its haunches. One of those shots had come from the rim, but the other two had sounded from perhaps two hundred yards to the left.

Six shots now came in swift succession, two of them from the rim above her. Lida's heart swelled with pride and joy. Bob Orton was still alive. But was he wounded? She had seen him fall. Stubborn courage told her not to flee from the man who had come to help her at the risk of his life.

"But what can I do? I haven't any gun?"

She whirled the pony, caught its sides with cruel

rowels. Down across the bench they sped, down another steep fifty yards. Lida leaned far back in the saddle and plied spurs.

"Run, you coyote, run!" she whispered. "If you stumble *I'll* break your neck!"

She did not think of the risk to her own neck, or of the once gorgeous riding outfit. As the horse struck the bottom of the steep descent she eased forward but did not stop using her spurs. The group of ranch buildings and corrals was only a mile away now and perhaps three hundred feet below. across rolling, grassy hills.

On the mesa Bob Orton lay back of the dead horse as bullets thudded into the carcass with sickening, dead sounds. He heard lead whizz past. He lifted and fired whenever he saw a puff of smoke drift above a clump of chaparral.

As he fired and as he lay low to avoid being hit, he hated himself. He knew well enough the identity of the men who were trying to kill him, but he had the satisfaction of knowing that again he had foiled the kidnapping of Lida Leighton.

Jack Kirk and Brad Bradley, the outlaws he had pursued down the hills towards Mesa Prieta had doubled back to southward and by riding hard had managed to reach a point ahead of him and Lida.

"If I had a horse I'd ride those two down, Bob told himself as he pressed cartridges past the magazine clip. He knew the animals the outlaws rode must be all but exhausted, but he was well aware of the fact that he himself had no animal at all.

He measured the distance to the rim and fought down the desire to run to it to see whether Lida were safe. He looked about for better protection, saw none. A bullet ripped through the saddle-skirt, sending a spray of wool and leather. Another slug sogged into the exposed hind-quarter of the dead horse.

Bob squirmed to where he could peer over the neck. He saw nothing at first except two balls of blue-grey smoke that drifted upward from as many brush-protected piles of rocks. Then he made out two saddled horses that were almost hidden behind some mountain mahogany and ironwood bushes about two hundred and fifty yards away.

Disdaining death for a moment while bullets sogged and whizzed about him, Bob Orton fired at the two horses. He flinched, but made his next aim as steady as he could. He had fired ten shots when he heard a yell from one of the clumps of brush:

"Hell! He's tryin' to kill our hosses, Jack!"

"He is?" From the other patch of brush. "Why, the—!"

Back of the dead horse Bob Orton lay lower while a fiercer fusillade of bullets hit the carcass, kicked up dust about him. One bullet actually came through a part of the dead horse and hit him a stinging blow on the left side. He uttered a gasp and whipped his hand to the wound. He found a battered slug ugly with the blood and flesh of the horse.

"Thanks, Buck," he said wryly. "You've carried me many a mile. Now it looks as if you've saved my life."

He became aware of the cessation of shooting but did not lift at once. This might be a ruse to make him expose himself. When he did rise enough to peer over the carcass he discovered that the two men who had been trying to kill him were dragging into their saddles. He jumped to his feet and began pouring lead at them as fast as he could work the lever of the Winchester. He lowered the hot-barrelled rifle, grimaced.

"Got away again!" he cursed and wished for a live horse.

He ran to the rim, saw a horse and rider streaking it across foothills towards a group of ranch buildings and trees. He went back to a spot beside the dead horse, hesitated and began to search the region to southward with narrowed, fierce eyes.

Though he knew he could not overtake the outlaws if they were actually in flight he ran after them, disdaining the protection of rocks and brush. Panting, he reached the rise at the left where he had seen them disappear. He dropped to one knee, cocked his rifle. He was about to turn back when from behind a low, rocky hogback some four hundred yards away he saw two riders appear, their horses at a lagging trot.

"Long range for a forty-four," he growled, "but I'll try it."

He was levering a second cartridge into the rifle when

he saw a little puff of dust under the belly of the rear horse. He fired again, elevating the end of the Winchester a little. He had shot for a third time before the outlaws were leaning low over the horns of their saddles and racing towards another hogback He sent three more bullets after them before they disappeared.

"Got away again!" Orton growled as he gripped the rifle hard with his left hand. "I'll get those two yet!"

After a moment of thought he discarded the thought of further pursuit and remembered Lida Leighton. Where was she? What was she doing? Was she safe at home at last?

Bob slowly began to retrace his steps to the dead horse. He had travelled half the distance when he became aware of a numbness in his left arm. He clamped his fingers round it.

The only two men not out on the range heard the shots that came down from the rim a mile or so away as the crow flies. They ceased their work of repairing a wagon and listened.

"What you think she is?" asked Chuck Ely. "Too many shots for somebody a-shootin' deer or antelope."

"Sounds like a Injun war," Ed Davis muttered. "There ain't none of the boys up that way to come acrost rustlers."

"Nope, not a one of 'em up there," agreed Ely.

While they heard more shots they ambled across the wide, unfenced yard. Davis called Leighton from the big adobe house. They did not need to tell the rancher what had brought them, for he heard shots the moment he stepped to the wide front porch.

"Who's doin' that shootin' up there?" he growled as he looked towards the westerly rim. "Sounds like a battle." Jane Leighton hurried from the house when she heard excited voices. She was a tall woman, full-breasted and handsome, with silvery hair that had once been brown.

"What is the matter?" she cried, then looked westward. "Shooting! Why is somebody shooting so much, Joe?"

"That's more than any one man shooting up there, Jane," the rancher declared as his blue eyes slitted and his close-cropped sandy beard bristled. "I'd like to know who's doin' it on my range!"

"It ain't nobody after venison or 'lope," grunted the

grisled Ely. "No siree! I heard shootin' afore when men was a-tryin' to kill each other. It don't sound the same a-tall."

"Sounds to me like a Injun war," put in Davis. "Listen, there ain't no more. I wonder if the war is over."

Slim Haines, whose left leg had been broken six weeks before when a horse had fallen on him, came hobbling from the bunk-house. He had covered half the distance to the ranch-house when he stopped, resting on his crutches and his whole leg. His lean, brown face was incredulous. Round a barn and a clump of trees came a sorrel pony with dirt and dust flying from under its hooves as it made the turn. Upon its back was a girl clad in green. Her hat was gone, and strands of auburn hair were whipping in the wind the motion of the pony created.

"My gosh! It's her!" Slim gasped, and began to grin. "She's comin' like somebody was shootin' at her!"

"Why, it's Lida!" cried Jane Leighton, and felt cold fear grip her heart.

"Gosh a'mighty!" growled Lida's father. "I didn't expect her till—"

Ely and Davis had seen the girl do too many unexpected things to be much surprised now. Still, she looked as if she were actually frightened.

"What is it, Lida? What's the matter?" Mrs. Leighton demanded as the sliding pony sent up a shower of dust almost at the edge of the porch. "Are they trying to kill you?"

"No, no! They're trying to kill him!" the girl panted as she straightened in the saddle.

Ely and Davis looked at each other and asked mute questions.

"Who? Who they tryin' to kill, Lida?" asked her father. "Who is he?"

There was excruciating pain in her left side, and Lida put a hand upon it and pressed hard while she tried to speak. It seemed as if the swift, jolting ride had pounded out all her breath. She slid to the ground and was caught in her mother's arms.

"What on earth is wrong, honey? Have they hurt you? Was it you they were shooting at?"

"No, no!" the girl answered as she broke free. "They were shooting at—" She stood trembling, seemed unable to go on.

Slim, who had hobbled up, grinned incredulously at her. She had amazed him many times, but now he was more amazed than he had ever been. She managed a sympathetic smile that brought a little colour to her tense face.

"Is the leg about well, Slim?" she faltered.

"Oh, sure, it's all well," Slim laughed. "She wasn't hurt bad."

"That's—that's fine, Slim."

Lida whirled as her arm was gripped by one of her father's big hands.

The girl faced him, her eyes almost black, as he demanded to be told what was wrong.

"They are trying to kill him, Dad! That's why I came for help. They killed his horse, and I saw him fall!"

"But who is he, Lida?" her mother begged. "Who are they trying to kill? And why are you back home before we expected you, dear?"

"They are trying to kill Bob, Mother—Bob Orton! Oh, why doesn't somebody do something about it?"

"Bob Orton?" echoed Jane Leighton in bewilderment.

"Say, look here, Lida!" the girl's father growled. "Have you gone and got married while you were away? Is this Bob Orton the man you married?"

"Oh, for goodness sake no, Dad!" cried the excited girl. "I didn't get married! I never intend to! Bob Orton is the man who saved me from those—those—oh, why don't you do something to help him? He risked his life for me!"

"She ain't foolin' this time, Joe!" Chuck Ely said. "Best see if we can't get the story out of her."

"I should say I'm not fooling, Chuck!" Lida told her story quickly now, and before it was finished the rancher was ordering Ely and Davis to get their horses and guns.

"Saddle me a horse, too, Chuck."

As her father went into the house for weapons Lida sank wearily to the porch and took her face between her hands. Behind her Jane Leighton shook her silvery head.

"Why, Lida, what on earth happened to your pretty riding-habit?"

"Oh, never mind this pretty habit!" Lida advised, but did not turn her distraught face. "I'll tell you about that later."

Joe Leighton came from the house carrying three rifles. His sidearms were buckled on. The two cow-boys came

across the yard leading three saddled horses. The rancher saw that Davis carried a Winchester and laid one of the rifles on the porch. Like a flash Lida jumped up to her feet and grabbed it. She sprang towards the sweating, blowing sorrel.

"Where are you going, Lida? What are you going to do?" her mother cried as the girl jumped to the saddle.

"I'm going to help!" Lida said with defiance and courage as her eyes became dark and luminous. "He helped me twice, and I'm going to try to help him once!"

Despite the commands of her mother and father she whirled the sorrel about and dashed away ahead of the men.

"Well, I'll be dawg-goned," Slim Haines muttered, and grinned inanely.

"I wonder what she'll do next?" Jane Leighton murmured, and sank to a chair to watch the dust raised by the running horses.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The winded pony was no match for the fresh horses that Leighton and his cowboys rode. The rancher slowed pace beside his daughter.

"What is all this foolishness?" he demanded.

"It isn't foolishness!" she retorted. "Don't you see I mean what I told you?"

"I hope you know what you're doing for once! What tore that dress?"

"Brush! Brush and cactus!"

He wanted to stop and question her, but she kept the sorrel at a gallop. He rode close to her.

"Where'd you find this man that's bein' shot at?" he demanded.

"I didn't find him. He found me."

"Where?"

She gave him a stoical look. She could not confess now that she had defied the advice of Minton and other men in Mesa Prieta.

"Oh, don't ask so many questions Dad! Don't you see a man is being killed up there? If he hasn't been killed already it's a wonder."

Now, though the grade was steepening, she tortured the

sides of the sorrel with the rowels until the wiry little animal kept pace with the fresher, heavier horses. Leighton resolved to ask her a great many questions when they returned to the ranch. What was she doing home a week ahead of time? What had torn that pretty dress? Why had she tangled up with some stranger who had led her into trouble? He would have questions to ask that stranger, too, provided the fellow were still alive.

Lida and her father fell a little behind, and as they neared the beginning of the first climb they saw that the cowboys had halted and had hands ready to go for weapons. Lida lifted her eyes. A man on foot was swinging down the trail. He wore two sixshooters and had a rifle across his right shoulder. She felt weak and her heart leaped with gratitude. For the moment she loved Bob Orton.

"Thank God they didn't get him!" she murmured.

"That your man?" her father demanded.

She was instantly belligerent.

"He isn't my man! He just happened to come along and he helped me out. That was all."

She turned her head to avoid her father's probing look, and reddened. She saw Bob Orton lift a friendly hand, saw Davis and Ely relax their tension.

"Don't worry about him, boys!" she called. "He's the man they were trying to kill."

"Well, he sure don't look like they'd made a very good job of it," Leighton said as he appraised the tall figure coming down the trail.

"I hope they didn't hit you, Miss Leighton," Orton said as he stopped.

"Oh, they didn't hurt me! But how about you? Your sleeve is all bloody!"

She was out of her saddle before her father could lift his right foot from its stirrup. She ran to Orton, caught his hand.

"It's just a small flesh wound," he told her. "Little more than a scratch, Miss Leighton."

"Shucks!" laughed the rancher. "If his arm was shot off he couldn't hold your hand like that, Lida."

Ely and Davis laughed now and the girl reddened and snatched her hand away.

"He wasn't holding my hand! I was holding his to see whether his arm was much hurt."

Now that Orton was safe, she seemed to lose interest in him. She turned and smoothed some wrinkles from the much-patched green skirt, then broke off a piece of sage and began to wipe the sweaty lather from the hind-quarters of the heaving sorrel.

"What's the meanin' of this rumpus, mister?" Leighton asked.

Lida turned quickly.

"He is Mr. Bob Orton, Dad," she said. "I guess I forgot to introduce you."

The men shook hands. Bob shook with Ely and Davis, who appraised him no less thoroughly than did the rancher.

In Leighton Bob Orton saw a big man, not tall but thick and broad, a man with close-cropped sandy beard and heavy moustache, a man with steady blue eyes and character stamped upon every exposed feature of his face.

Bob was wondering how much of the story Lida had told. After all, why should he tell all of it if she had not? He was about to speak when he saw the girl turn her head. There was mute appeal in her eyes, in her small smile. It was as if she said, "If anybody tells them, let me do it, please!" Bob was sure that if she had made any explanations it had doubtless been sketchy.

"Well, sir," he declared, "I don't know what to make of it, Mr. Leighton. They likely took me and your daughter for somebody else."

The girl turned quickly, rested a hand upon the neck of the pony.

"They opened up on us just as we were ready to start down the steep trail!" she interrupted as if she herself did not understand.

She came now to stand between Orton and her father. She told how she had seen the former's horse fall, then him drop as he had sent her horse plunging down the grade.

"I thought you had been killed, Mr. Orton! I hated to run for the ranch, but it seemed the only thing to do."

Orton did not explain that he had sent her horse over the rim to protect her from flying lead. He met the rancher's steady look with one as steady.

"Your first thought was of protectin' her, wasn't it, Orton?"

"Maybe it was," Bob answered. "It all happened so fast I didn't do much thinking. I knew she didn't have a

gun, and that up there on the rim was no place for her even if she did have one."

"Say, I wonder who them durned dry-gulchers can be?" asked Davis.

"Maybe a couple of them cheap rustlers we hear's been operatin' out of Mesa," grunted Ely. "You reckon they turned highway robbers and tried to kill this feller so's they could rob Lida?"

Orton was grateful for the question because when the pursuit of Kirk and Bradley was begun he wanted to begin it single-handed.

"I don't believe that was the case," he said. "I think they simply mistook me for some other man. You see we are near enough the border to meet up with plenty of mal hombres."

Bob had to smile as he looked at the girl's anxious face. He knew what troubled her most now—those two dead men back near the middle of the mesa had to be explained without confession that she had been so stubborn and wilful that she had ridden squarely into the trap set for her, also without confessing that but for his opportune arrival she would now be on her way to the hangout of the outlaws, to be there held for fat ransom.

"By golly, Lida!" blurted Chuck Ely, as if he were seeing what she wore for the first time. "That there's sure a purty ridin' kostoom!"

"It was once," she said with a rueful little laugh, and sidled closer to her father. "That fool sorrel is hard-mouthed, darn him! He bucked me right into a thicket."

"Durned if he didn't make a good job of it, too," Ely remarked solemnly as he looked at the white string with which the larger rents had been mended. "You reckon he sorter had a feelin' agin green, same as a fightin' bull has agin red?"

"He's just a crazy hard-mouth," Lida said stiffly. "He hasn't got any more sense than some people."

Ed Davis was shaking his carroty head. He had thought Lida superlatively pretty, even in calico. Now he wondered how beautiful she had been before the riding-habit had been wrecked.

"It's a orful shame," he muttered, his face turning redder than his hair. "That there ridin' dress was worth a durned sight more'n the horse. Wasn't it, Lida?"

"Oh, for goodness sake quit worrying about my dress!" cried the girl. "What are we going to do about those men who shot at us?"

Leighton growled that this was what he wanted to know.

"We're wastin' time here. Orton, you reckon we can take the trail of those two hellions and overtake them?"

Her father's look told Lida that if this were done she could return to the ranch. She shuddered at this thought. If Bob Orton were allowed to go with her father and the cowboys he would tell them everything. She tried to read Orton's suddenly sober face, and as he caught her look she begged him with eyes and smile.

"I doubt that it would do any good, Mr. Leighton," Orton said. He explained that the last he had seen of the would-be murderers they had been travelling southwards as fast as their horses could take them. It was not more than thirty miles to the border. "I'm afraid they have too much lead on us, sir. They must be ten miles from here by this time."

Lida held her breath until her father said,

"I reckon that's right, Orton. After they saw they hadn't got you they likely decided to high-tail it for the line."

"I think that is just what they did," Lida agreed. "Besides, it would be hard work tracking them across that brushy, broken country."

"It would be hard," Bob said after she had flashed him a melting smile.

Though forceful and brusque, the rancher's manner was one of deep appreciation for what Orton had done. Now he looked at the young stranger as if he must be the final arbiter of this question.

"What would you advise about it, Orton?"

"Well," Bob said soberly, "I think with the lead those men have, the best thing we can do, Mr. Leighton is to go to your ranch and talk it over."

Lida saw her father shoot Orton a keen, probing look that was not unmixed with suspicion. She turned cold. It was as if her father were wondering whether Orton's apparent reluctance to pursue the killers meant that he knew more than he cared to divulge about them. She did not breathe freely until she saw the change of expression on the

rancher's face and heard him say gruffly that he thought Orton was right.

"Let's get back home. I'm glad enough it turned out no worse than it did, Orton. That arm of yours hurt much?"

"Not much," said Bob. "Fact is, if it wasn't for the blood I wouldn't know there was anything wrong with it. I'll walk."

"I reckon you won't!" the rancher disagreed. "Here, Ed, you take Chuck up behind you and let Orton have your horse."

Though Bob insisted that he could easily walk the short distance to the ranch headquarters, Leighton would not hear of it.

"All right," Bob accepted, and took Ely's horse.

Lida tried to manœuvre so she could ride close beside the man who had twice saved her, but as usual her father had stubborn ideas. She reluctantly took a position beside the grey that carried the two cowboys, and bit her lip angrily as she saw her father and Orton forging ahead as if they wanted to be out of hearing in order that they could discuss subjects not for her ears.

"If he tells Dad all about it," she whispered. "I'll never like him again!"

In less than half an hour Lida, her father and Bob Orton were upon the front porch of the big house while Jane Leighton's handsome and motherly face was soft with pleasure and gratitude while she held Bob's right hand. Lida started paled as she heard her father order the cowboys to get two pack horses and head for the mesa.

"Orton, you tell 'em just where they'll find them two dead men."

Lida stood outwardly calm but actually angry and fearful while Orton instructed the riders where they would find the two men he had been forced to kill. How unfair it was of him to have told all about it!

"And now," said Mrs. Leighton, "it is time for us to take care of that arm of yours. Mr. Orton."

Bob protested that his arm was all right. He had stopped the flow of blood from the small wound and it gave him no pain.

"You come along and let us see!" Lida commanded as she grasped his good arm. "You're not the doctor, Mr. Orton."

He stepped into the spacious, comfortable front room.

"You wait here, Mr. Orton;" Mrs. Leighton said. "I'll get some soap and water and something to tie it up with."

When they were left alone Bob Orton looked at the girl. Her violet eyes softened and her red lips trembled, but before she could decide what to say she heard her mother returning. Mrs. Leighton carried a basin of steaming water in one hand, and towel, soap and a strip of white sheet in the other.

"Now let's take a look at that arm, Mr. Orton. It looks to me like it was bleeding again."

It as not until almost supper-time that Lida found opportunity to talk with Bob Orton with no hearers present.

"What did you tell my father?" she demanded.

"Why, I just told him I had been out looking for some rustlers, and that I happened to meet up with a couple of them and they put up a fight," he replied, "and that just after I had to rub those two out I ran across you. Should I have explained differently to him?"

Lida studied his tanned face.

"Is that all you told him?" she queried. "You didn't tell him it all happened because I made a stubborn fool of myself?

She glanced about as if fearful that somebody was looking or listening. The sun had set and they were in the shadow of a cottonwood at the end of the ranch-house away from the other buildings. As he looked down at her Bob saw that her eyes were violet. She moved a little closer to him, lifted her face to show him a tender smile.

"I'd like to thank you—Bob. I want you to know I appreciate all you have done for me."

Bob Orton lifted his hands to her shoulders. As he began to tighten his arms and draw her towards him she braced her palms gently against his breast. Her eyes darkened and her lips pressed tight together.

"But you mustn't!" she cried. "You told me you were going to be married!"

"I am," he declared as his eyes warmed and twinkled, "to you."

"To—to me?"

"Yeah."

"Why—why you——!" she hissed, and pushed with

all her strength. He held her for a struggling moment, then let her go.

"I hate you! I hate you!" she cried. "And I thought you were different from the rest of them!" She rushed towards the porch, but before she reached it she whirled. "And you have the nerve to tell me you are going to marry me after I have known you for less than a day!"

Bob nodded, smiled at her.

"That's it, Lida."

"I guess not!" she cried as she stamped her foot in the dust. "You can just go and bark up another tree, Mr. Orton! I'm not that easy to marry even if you did save me twice to-day!"

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

AT SUPPER Lida was demure, though not without traces of her usual self-assurance. With apparent willingness she told of her experiences between Mesa Prieta and the ranch, and wanted to slap Orton when he meticulously agreed with everything she said, though she was in constant fear lest he would say something to disclose the entire truth. She looked at him steadily and tried to be impersonal.

"The skunk!" she muttered to herself. "He's going to get me in a hole some way, and——"

She caught Orton smiling at her and her quick anger rose. Nevertheless she gave him a smile.

"Well," Joe Leighton declared in his brusque way, "we owe Orton a lot, Lida."

"Yes." The girl nodded.

"Why, Lida! Don't you appreciate what he has done?" cried her mother. "If Mr. Orton had not been with you to-day there is no telling what might have happened to you."

Lida suppressed a shudder at the thought of what her real fate might have been, but she had not forgiven Bob for taking the initiative.

"Said I was going to marry him!" she gritted silently. "Why didn't he wait to see whether I could love him? I'd have let him know. I wouldn't marry him now if—if—"

She became aware that Orton was speaking, and tried not to appear too interested in what he said.

"I doubt that those men would have harmed your daughter, Mr. Leighton. They were after me."

Lida's eyes widened, then quickly narrowed.

"Why, the big liar!" she said under her breath. "I wonder if he lies as easily as that to girls? Or did he just figure he could say he wanted to marry me because of what he did to-day?"

"Are you sure of this, Orton?" the rancher asked.

"Yes," Bob answered coolly. "I have a good many enemies down this way. I'm afraid I led your daughter into danger instead of protecting her from it."

Lida wanted to cry out that he lied, for in her innate character was a strong desire to tell the truth.

"Oh, why do people get in such messes over little things?" she asked herself. "See what happened just because I wouldn't take Mr. Minton's advice."

The desire for truth-telling became so strong in her that she knew she had to flee to keep from confessing what a fool she had been.

"If you folks don't mind I think I'll go outside," she said.

"What's the matter?" demanded her father. "Sick?"

"Of course not!' she denied. "But it is cooler outside, and I guess I'm a little tired."

"Why, the poor girl's been through enough today to make her sick!" Lida's mother said compassionately. "You go right along, honey. We'll excuse you."

Lida marched towards the front porch with her back stiff and her chin high. Her eyes were darker than the gloom of the big room.

"Bob Orton didn't care whether I stayed or not," she sighed. Then her little self-pity was gone and anger was with her again, and fear "If he tells them what actually happened to-day I never will forgive him!"

" It was not genuine fear that chilled her, but the thought of the humiliation that would come if she were discovered lying. She tried to believe that Orton would say nothing about her experience with the four kidnappers. She stood in the thick dust of the yard and tried to make herself be confident that he would tell nothing more than he had told already. When Bob came out he saw her walking slowly

towards a group of cowboys at the bunk-house as if she were entirely unaware that he had been coming to join her.

He took a chair on the porch, rolled a cigarette. He could hear her happy voice, her laughter. She was evidently telling the cowboys a modified version of the wrecking of the green riding-habit. He smiled and mused that she was a pretty good liar. Then he was serious. After all, he had aided and abetted her mendacity.

His smile returned when he visualized her explosive action when he had declared he was going to marry her. He chuckled aloud, and told himself—

"She went into the air like a filly with a bunch of cholla cactus under the saddle. And she was sure some bronco!"

His musings were interrupted by the appearance of the rancher and his wife. Leighton thoughtfully placed a chair for her, then sat down, lit a cigar.

"You're still dead set on leavin' us to-morrow, Orton?"

"Where is Lida?" Mrs. Leighton asked before Bob could answer. "I thought she was here."

"From all the noise over yonder I reckon she must be entertainin' the cowboys," said her husband.

"Why, that's right!" Mrs. Leighton agreed, and wanted to offer apology for her daughter's lack of politeness to their guest. "She is very fond of all the riders, Mr. Orton."

"She seems thoughtful and kind with everybody," Bob smiled, though perhaps it was well that the darkness hid his face.

"Huh!" exploded the rancher. "You don't know her. She's got a temper like a wildcat, though she can be sweeter than honey when she wants to."

Bob made no comment about this, but said,

"Yes, I must be on my way to-morrow. There is some business that won't wait."

"Oh, I wish you could stay with us a while!" cried Mrs. Leighton impetuously. "You'd be welcome as long as you wanted to visit with us, Mr. Orton."

"Thank you," Bob smiled. "I may be back."

"Well, if you don't come back after you've finished this business of yours I'm goin' to take your trail and bring you back," laughed the rancher. "I want to see more of you, young man."

In front of the lighted bunk-house Lida stopped in the middle of a story, tensed and looked towards the dark porch of the ranch-house. The fear that Bob had told her parents all about the happenings of the day caused her to cut short the remainder of her story. She rose and laughed confidently, shrugged.

"I'll tell you some more about it some other time, boys. Right now I must go and visit with the folks. After all, I have been away for six months."

"Sure it ain't that young feller you want to visit with?" inquired Dave Anderson.

"No, it isn't! I don't like him. Isn't it natural I should want to see my mother after I've been away for so long? I just came over here to let you boys know I was glad to see you, too."

She marched away, at first with stiff dignity, then with supple grace coming to her step, to the swing of her healthy young body.

"The hell she don't want to see him!" chuckled "Shanghai" Bailey softly.

"If she does he's sure got my sympathy," declared Sam Jenkins. "The feller that gits her'll sure saddle him a filly as won't tame."

"Wal, I dunno," disagreed Slim of the mending leg.

"Aw you! You ain't old enough to savvy nothin' a-tall aboot women!" snorted Shanghai. "She's harder to keep a finger on'n a durned flea."

With outward serenity Lida stepped to the porch, but she refused her mother's invitation to sit down.

"I just had to go and let the boys see I had not forgotten them," she said.

"I know they were glad to see you," Bob Orton drawled.

"Oh, they always let on they are glad to see me. But there is never any telling just what a cowboy thinks."

"Huh!" ejaculated the rancher. "What about yourself, Lida? I've known you as long as any body has, and durned if I can ever guess what you're thinkin'."

"Why, Dad, the idea I am really transparent!"

"As granite rock," retorted the rancher.

"As glass," Orton commented to himself. "Won't you take that chair, Miss Leighton?"

She moved towards the chair, but stopped when she realized she had been swayed by something he had said.

"If you don't mind I think I'll go to bed. I seem to be getting tired."

"You surely must be," Bob agreed feelingly.

Lida wanted to cry out at him and demand what right he had to sympathize with her. Hadn't she been able to insult him when he had had the nerve to tell her he was going to marry her?

"I am," she declared with weariness that was not all simulated. "You'll excuse me, won't you?"

"Certainly," answered Bob with brusqueness that made her start.

Lida's mother said she would go in with the girl. In the dark living-room Lida stopped, stiffened.

"If he tells Father how I refused to take old Minton's advice and was grabbed by those outlaws, I'll—" she whispered.

"What's the matter, Lida?" called her mother, who had already reached the hallway. "Aren't you coming?"

"Yes, I'm coming," Lida answered sweetly. "I just wanted to see whether I had forgotten anything."

The sun, an hour up, blazed into Lida's eyes when she appeared on the broad gallery next morning. There was the usual early forenoon laziness about the place, for the cowboys had gone two hours before. The girl looked about with some disappointment. She had dressed with particular care.

Then she saw Bob Orton leading a big bay gelding across the yard from the stable where her father kept his string of saddle horses. She recognized the animal instantly, one of the best on the ranch. She knew the saddle and bridle, too.

"Horse-thief!" she muttered under her breath. "He would take the best one." Then she remembered how and why Orton's horse had been killed the day before, and did not feel so angry.

She forced herself to admit that he was very good looking, and as honest and reliable as he had appeared yesterday. Then she coloured with pleasure. He had stopped twenty feet away and was appraising her with open admiration and warmth in his grey eyes. She wanted to

tell him he was seeing only the white dress of fine muslin with its delicate embroidery that matched her eyes.

"You are very beautiful this morning, Lida."

She could not suppress a gasp of surprise. It was not that he had called her Lida, but the tone and look he had used when he had spoken.

"It's the dress," she laughed. "Let us hope it won't meet the same fate as the green one, eh?"

"It won't," he said, and she was momentarily a little frightened as she saw his eyes chill. "I'll see to that!"

Lida bit at her lip to keep back a disdainful and angry retort. Orton led the bay closer. tossed the reins over its head, tested the saddle.

"I'm going away for a time, Lida." He looked steadily at her and there was no twinkle in his eyes. "I don't know how long I'll be gone, but I'll be back to hear you say you've changed your mind."

She stared at him in simulated bewilderment, put a furrow down her smooth forehead.

"I don't know what you mean, Mr. Orton. So far as you and I are concerned there is nothing for me to change my mind about."

Bob Orton smiled a very little.

"You know just what I mean. Lida. I'll be back before very long. Adios."

Then he was in the saddle, reining away. She called to him. He stopped the bay but did not turn it, only looking about with a mute question in his eyes.

"I am sorry I shan't be here when you get back," Lida said. "I am going back to San Francisco next week."

She made her eyes darken as they met the steady look from his.

"Then," he said, "I'll find you in San Francisco. Adios."

After she had looked at his retreating back for a few moments Lida lifted her chin and marched into the house. She stopped in the deserted living-room.

"Of all the nerve! He thinks I ought to fall head-over-heels in love with him just because of what he did yesterday. If he thinks he has any hold on me I'll ask Dad to pay him a thousand dollars for what he did. That's all it's worth."

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

LIDA spent a restless torenoon. She alternated between thoughts of Bob Orton and of the two cowboys who had gone to Mesa Prieta the preceding day. She tried to believe that her interest in Bob was only curiosity as to where he had gone and why, but she flared into silent anger when she recalled how he had left the ranch after so brief a stay, and her anger grew immensely when she remembered what he had said about marrying her.

A hundred times that forenoon she wished she had told a truthful story when she had arrived at the Lazy L. Now if the truth had to be told there would have to be explanations. At times she almost wished she had not been rescued from the kidnappers. Being their prisoner would at least have been a new experience in her romantic life.

"Where did Mr. Orton go?" she demanded of her father.

Joe Leighton shrugged his head.

"He didn't tell me much about it, Lida. I figured maybe he'd told you."

She gave him a searching look.

"Why should he tell me?"

"Well, I figured maybe you two had become friends."

"He isn't my friend," she said, and turned away.

Leighton watched her, shook his head and grinned.

"Somethin's troublin' her, I reckon. I'll find out what it is before I'm through. I wonder if she's worryin' about that green dress. Doggoned if it wasn't pretty!"

Shortly after noon Ely and Davis returned. Lida came from the house, a little fearful.

"Did you find the two dead outlaws, boys!" she queried.

"Yeah, we found 'em," said old Ely.

"Didn't have no trouble a-tall," added Davis. "That feller Orton, he sure knows how to give directions. Where is the son-of-a-gun?"

"He rode away somewhere early this morning," answered the girl. "I don't know where."

"He did, did he?" ejaculated Ely. "Say, the constable in Mesa wants to talk to him about killin' them two hombres."

"I think," Lida said in sudden defence of the man who had saved her, "that he will show up in Mesa."

Lida wanted to ask more questions, but they were silenced when she heard Ely say to her father:

"Minton says tell you he's powerful glad Lida got home as safe as she did."

"That old meddler!" the girl murmured. "I don't see why he thought I wouldn't get home safely."

She could not follow as the cowboys went with her father into the room he used as office. She tried to read the faces of the three as they came out

"Thank you for those little things, boys," Leighton said. "You had as well take the rest of the day off on pay."

Lida waited until the cowboys were near the bunk-house, then turned to her father.

"What little things did you mean?" she asked.

"Just some little odds and ends they brought from town," he answered. "There was a bottle of whisky and a box of cigars."

She looked at him keenly.

"They didn't have a bottle of whisky and a box of cigars when they went into the office with you, Dad."

He explained that the cowboys had merely brought a flask of whisky and a few loose cigars, what they could carry in their pockets.

"Sort of thoughtful of them, don't you think?" he queried soberly.

"Why—yes," she said, and sauntered away.

Bob Orton picked up the trail of Jack Kirk and Brad Bradley where he had last seen them riding hard to escape his bullets. From there it was not an easy trail to follow across the broken country. At times he lost the tracks completely and was forced to ride in circles to pick up the sign.

He expected the trail to veer westward towards Mesa Prieta, but after he had followed it for two hours he found that it led steadily southwards. He was resolved now to follow the outlaws into Sonora if this was necessary. He devoted the four hours of the middle of the day to riding across grassy hills that were dotted with white-oaks and on which many cattle grazed. The grass added to his difficulties in following the trail of the two horses.

As midday approached the terrain became more broken, and by four o'clock he was riding across a region of rough mesas and cliffs dotted with rocky little buttes on which cactus and mesquite and paloverde grew tenaciously.

Keeping to the trail was easier now because there was little if any grass and the tracks of the shod horses kept to the lower places where travelling was easier and where there was some soil to take the imprints of hoofs.

Orton had been watchful all day, and now he quickened his vigilance. Sooner or later the men he followed would have to make camp. However, he remembered that they had a day's lead on him. This might well mean he would have to give up following the trail directly and ride wide to pick up trace of them in some border village or at some isolated ranch or Mexican miner's camp.

He let his horse pick its way slowly up a rocky slope, allowed the animal to rest when they topped a low mesa which was irregular and limited in area. Partly because he was tired of the saddle, partly as additional precaution, he dismounted and led the horse across the mesa. As he neared its southerly rim he dropped the bridle reins and proceeded on foot. He stopped a few yards back of the broken rim.

Looking about, he saw some saguaro and paloverde close to the brink of the mesa. Retracing his steps to the horse, he led it farther back. Then he approached a giant cactus.

From behind this half screen he saw that about two hundred feet below was the beginning of a little valley hemmed in by mesas and rocky hills. From the east and south four canyons led into it like as many fingers spread widely. What particularly interested him was a small grove of cottonwoods which indicated a spring against the cliff at the westerly side of the depression. Back of the cottonwoods stood a small adobe cabin which he supposed had been or was now inhabited by some Mexican ranchero or prospector. The small hidden valley was well carpeted with gramma, and he made out two horses grazing near the spring. He could tell even at the distance of three hundred yards that the animals were hobbled.

The spot on which Orton crouched was a ragged point of mesa from which he fortunately had view of practically all the little valley He flattened himself now and used for screen the scanty branches of some stunted sage that projected towards a small barrel-cactus.

"The same two horses those hombres rode when I was doing the long-range shooting at them," Orton told himself with pleasure. "Likely they decided they were far enough from the Lazy L and near enough the border to take a day's rest."

While he watched the adobe hut Orton guessed at the distance to the international boundary, perhaps twenty miles, but more probably not more than ten or fifteen.

Presently he saw a man appear from the doorway of the hut. The man stood for a few watchful moments, then started towards the cottonwoods with what looked like a water pail in his right hand.

"That short, black——!" Orton muttered with grim satisfaction.

The man, who was indeed Brad Bradley, soon returned to the adobe, and a little later Orton saw smoke curling from the hole in the roof.

Determined to take the two outlaws back to Mesa with him as prisoners or leave their dead bodies here, Bob looked about for a route by which he could safely descend into the depression. In a few minutes he had discovered that by following the broken mesa westwards for three or four hundred yards he could reach a steep canyon and that by descending this canyon he could come to the other mesa against which the adobe hut was built. Then by skirting the base of this mesa he could gain the small adobe.

He was neither impatient nor desperate now. He would wait until dark then surprise Jack Kirt and the other man. He was about ready to resign himself to a wait of two or three hours when he looked eastwards. In that direction, and just emerging from a canyon, was a rider.

"Another one of 'em!" Orton muttered. "Well, maybe this is a hangout. It's close enough to the border to be a good one."

He gave most of his attention to the newcomer. After travelling a hundred yards into the little valley the man stopped his horse and looked about. The distance was too great for Bob to tell much about him except that he was tall and probably young. He realized that the fellow might be looking about from vigilance or because he was unfamiliar with the place. Then, as if the rider knew just where he was going, he headed for the cottonwoods. As he neared the

trees, however, he stopped abruptly, leaned tensely forward over the horn of his saddle.

"I believe he's a stranger here," Bob muttered high above. "He's seen those horses and the adobe now."

For perhaps two minutes the rider waited. The distance was not so great but Orton could see he carried pistols and a belt that was doubtless filled with cartridges. Then he rode resolutely forward, but his posture in the saddle indicated that he was ready to grab a gun at the first sign of hostility.

"Some salty jasper," Bob smiled. "He's wondering whether there's some other hard-bitten hombres there ahead of him."

Skirting the northernmost corner of the six cottonwoods the rider reined in sharply. At the same moment two men appeared from the doorway of the hut, one moving to the left, the other to the right. From the rim Orton could tell by the crooks of their right arms that they held pistols on the newcomer.

"Well, that's not another member of the gang," Orton decided and with relief. He looked hard, wished he was near enough to hear.

Pete Nason, riding westwards, had missed hitting Mesa Prieta by about twenty-five miles. Now as he faced the armed and hostile men he kept his own right hand well away from the weapon he wore on that side, though he wanted to grab both guns and begin firing.

"Well, what do you want?" Jack Kirk drawled, no trace of friendliness on his sunburned face. The pistol at his hip was as steady as his eyes.

"You best do some convincin' talkin', feller, and do it pronto!" added Bradley.

Though a little chill of fear crept along Nason's spine he was not actually frightened. He had killed a man before he had left Texas, and to keep travelling fast he had stolen three good horses. He put a little more of his weight in one stirrup than in the other and smiled sardonically at the uncompromising faces and guns.

"Why you so damned on the prod?" he inquired as he lifted one eyebrow.

"You'll mighty soon find out if you're a John Law!" snarled Bradley as he moved away from the wall and shortened the distance to the newcomer by two yards.

"You got any talkin' to do?" demanded Kirk, keeping his position. "If you have, do it, and do it pronto!"

Trying to read the two hard-bitten faces, Pete Nason decided he had little to fear. To show his disdain of these men he fumbled in vest pocket for paper and tobacco, but kept his hands well away from weapons, as an outlaw would have done in the presence of other outlaws.

"Say!" growled Bradley. "We're talking business with you, hombre!"

Kirk said nothing, but kept his cold eyes on the man on the sorrel horse as he advanced a little. As Nason lifted the cigarette preparatory to liking the edge of the brown paper, he smiled, shrugged.

"Say," demanded the outlaw leader as the end of his sixshooter lifted a little, "we want to know what the hell you're doin' here?"

Nason ran the tip of his tongue along the paper, placed an end of the cigarette between his lips. However, he did not risk reaching for a match lest his action be misinterpreted.

"Well," snarled Bradley, "we want to know whether you are an officer, hombre! Are you a John Law?"

Shifting the unlighted cigarette to an end of his mouth, Nason soberly appraised the armed men on the ground, yet with a supercilious and slightly contemptuous twinkle in his eyes. For the first time since he had been forced away from the desolate ranch in the mesquite bottoms north of Verde, Pete Nason felt a thrill because of being a fugitive.

"I wonder if I'm plumb wrong in thinkin' you two are on the dodge?" Pete drawled.

"Well, what if we are?" Bradley challenged.

"That ain't either here or there, paisano!" growled Kirk as his eyes became bleaker. "If you're an officer your life ain't worth a plugged real."

Pete smiled, laughed heartily.

"Say, what makes you hombres think I'm an officer?" he demanded while his broad shoulders squared. "If you two are on the dodge so am I. Let's not be so damned hostile towards each other."

"What proof you got of it?" demanded Kirk.

"Yeah, what proof?" echoed Bradley.

From his concealment on the rim Bob Orton could see the man on the sorrel unbuckle his gun belt and hand it and his holstered weapons to the taller of the men on the ground.

"That plenty proof?" shrugged Nason.

"That's enough for us to talk on, I reckon," retorted Jack Kirk. "Slide off and rest your cack, paisano."

"What's your name?" demanded Bradley as Pete slid to the ground.

"Nate Peters," declared the newcomer after a moment of thought.

"All right, Nate Peters! But I'm warning you if you turn out to be an officer you won't never git back on that horse!"

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Bob Orton quickly decided against waiting for darkness. The arrival of the third man, who appeared to be an outlaw, had changed conditions. The three might move on, and if they did they would be harder to deal with. Orton was determined to take Kirk and the black-bearded man dead or alive. He had no grudge against the newcomer though his being accepted by the known outlaws was no recommendation of his character.

On sober thought Orton wondered whether the man who had appeared might actually be an officer out to capture what remained of Kirk's gang. This was possible, he knew. Orton now became impatient, telling himself that if anybody took the would-be kidnappers he would be the man to do it.

He lay upon the rim and watched the newcomer unsaddle and hobble his horse while Kirk watched. Presently the two went inside the adobe hut. Creeping back from the rim, Orton led his horse farther back and to westward. He wanted to leave the animal where it would not see or smell the horses in the little valley, and at the same time have it handy in case it were needed.

Hurrying along the mesa, Orton gained a spot from where he could see the hut again. He was pleased when he discovered there was not an opening at its northern end. He waited until heavy smoke began to roll from the hole in the flat, then hurried down the steep rocky slope.

Reaching the grassy floor of the canyon mouth, Orton lost no time in crossing it. He was about to stop against the cliff on which the hut backed when two of the horses lifted their heads. One snorted, jumped clumsily and looked

towards the cliff. Orton crouched back of a mesquite, rifle ready. He heard a man come to the door of the hut and curse.

"What the hell's wrong with you, cayuse?"

Prepared for battle at any time, Orton waited. Presently the horses resumed their grazing.

Orton was within fifty yards of the hut now. He quickly gained the base of the cliff. From here he saw a small unglazed opening in the back of the hut which was not more than twenty yards from the cliff. He took rifle in left hand and six-shooter in right. He was prepared for instant battle as he hurried as noiselessly as possible towards the rear of the little adobe. Reaching it, he flattened himself against the wall and drew in a deeper breath. He heard three voices inside. Debating with himself for a minute or two upon the advisability of looking in through the window, he decided against it.

He did not have to listen for more than five minutes to believe that if the newcomer were an officer he was playing the role of outlaw well. He seemed to be as hard as either of the others.

Orton was about ready to steal to the doorway and demand the surrender of the three inside when he heard something that made him hesitate. Then he stopped, tensed as he realized the men had stopped talking. He heard the rasp of metal on metal.

"Scraping something from a frying-pan," he told himself.

It was apparent now that the outlaws were beginning their meal for the smell of cooked food was strong in the air.

"Set up, Nate, and make the best of 'er," a man said. "Durned sorry we ain't got better."

"It's plenty bueno for me," accepted another, apparently the new arrival.

Orton crept to the southerly end of the hut, and what he discovered there made him want to shout with pleasure. A violent rain, beating from this direction, had dissolved and partially crumbled the dry-mud wall until it had left a ragged opening three feet from the ground.

Keeping a pistol ready in his right hand Orton peered through a small part of the ragged opening. He recognized the two men he had pursued. Kirk was tall, handsome but hard-bitten. The black-bearded one, whom he had heard called Brad, was heavy and stocky.

The third occupant of the hut was tall and lithe and his face, tanned like the faces of the others, bordered on handsomeness. He had his good Stetson pushed back far enough to reveal dark hair. He wore his six-shooters again. Orton saw they had yellowed bone handles.

This newcomer had the look of a man who somehow managed to keep a fastidious appearance in spite of a hard and probably long ride. He and the others were squatted on the floor eating from tin plates and drinking from tin cups. The newness of the utensils convinced Orton that this hang-out had been prepared, probably for the purpose of bringing Lida Leighton here. This was probably the place where she was to have been kept while an attempt was made to collect ransom.

It was not long before Orton discovered the newcomer was called Nate Peters.

"You say you had to vamos Texas pronto, Nate?" questioned Kirk.

"Aw, not in such a hell of a hurry," answered Pete Nason, trying to show bravado. "That—I killed out there in Verde wasn't so much I had to run because of him. I had some business to tend to up this way anyhow."

"Findin' a safe place to hole-up in, eh?" chuckled Bradley.

Orton saw the face of the newcomer harden.

"Not just that!" he swore. "I had to come out here to rub out another hombre. Lookin' for him now."

Bradley and Kirk now became grimly attentive as Nate went on.

"Yeah, I'm lookin' for a—as sure needs killin'. He gave my old man a raw deal years ago, and the old man wasn't able to come out and tend to the business himself. The old —may be dead by this time for all I know, he was that sick when I left home two weeks ago."

Missing not a word or look, Orton decided that this man was not only hard, he was also totally without human sympathy. Kirk and Bradley looked at each other as if debating the genuineness of the newcomer. "Peters," who had apparently eaten all the coarse food he wanted, nonchalantly rolled a cigarette.

"Mind tellin' us the name of this hombre you come to get?" suggested Bradley.

"Yeah, we been round this part of the world for quite a while," Kirk added. "We might be able to help you out a little."

With cigarette between lips, Nason studied the faces of the others as he would have tried to read the faces of the players in a poker game.

"You say you been around here quite a while?"

"Some time," Kirk replied guardedly.

"Plenty long enough to know the lay of a lot of country," Bradley chuckled.

Still Nason hesitated as if he were not sure of the cards the men held.

"'Course it's your own business," Bradley prompted.

"Plenty ours, too," added Kirk, his lean face hardening. "We don't want to horn in on any other man's game, Peters."

Pete Nason was now convinced that these men were genuine outlaws and as disdainful of the law as was he.

"I don't mind tellin' a couple of hombres like you," he shrugged. "The —'s name is Joe Leighton."

Outside the dry-mud wall Bob Orton felt a rush of hot rage, but conquered a desire to run to the door-way and begin shooting. Then he was wondering whether Peters had any real cause for killing Leighton. He saw Kirk and Bradley look at each other as if they were trying to mask surprise.

"You say you're here to rub out Joe Leighton?" Kirk asked cautiously.

"Yeah?" prompted Bradley with a look on his face that made Orton suspect that he was not pleased.

"He's the hombre I'm after!" the newcomer swore. "Like I told you, he done my old man a rotten turn years ago. It ain't because the old man ain't got the sand to tend to it himself. He's too sick to make the trip out here. We just found out a couple weeks ago where we could find this here Leighton." He added that from what he had learned he believed Leighton owned a Lazy L ranch not far from Mesa Prieta.

"We know the outfit," prompted Kirk.

"We orter know it!" Bradley added with a hard laugh.

It was evident to Orton that neither Bradley nor Kirk was pleased, which made him suspect that they had not forsaken their determination to kidnap Lida Leighton. Peters

now asked for the exact location of the Lazy L ranch. When he failed to get this information he tensed, studied the faces of his companions.

"There any reason why you can't tell me this?" he demanded with a show of anger. "Hell! If you don't want to I can find the outfit myself."

"It ain't that," Kirk replied with equal hardness. "What you said has just made us do some thinkin'."

"That's all," echoed Bradley, seeming as usual to want the last word.

Orton was now determined not to let one of these men get away, even though all three of them had to be left dead here in the lonely hut. He was cool, however.

"Mind if Brad and I step outside and do a little talkin', Peters?" Kirk said, by way of order rather than suggestion. "We got a little somethin' to talk over."

Nason arrogantly told them to go ahead, to talk as long as they liked.

"I'll clean up these frijoles while you're gone," he added.

Slipping back from the opening, Bob Orton tensed, gripped the pistol more firmly. He would have to shoot if Kirk and Bradley came to this end of the hut to talk. Bob slid back to the corner around it. As he peered cautiously around he saw the two outlaws walk towards the cottonwoods and stop. As they were facing each other and therefore had a sidelong view of the southerly end of the hut, Orton had to remain hidden behind its westerly side. He heard the man who claimed to be Nate Peters singing inside as if much pleased with himself.

Bob now decided to await all possible disclosures before attempting to take any of the men. From what he had already heard he believed he had as much reason for wanting Peters as he had for ending the lawless careers of the other two.

He did not move until he heard Kirk and Bradley re-enter the hut. Then he stole swiftly back to the ragged opening. The two sat down on one of the rickety bunks. Nason squirmed about until he faced them.

"We decided as how maybe you'd like to join up with us," said the leader.

"If you're as salty as you talk we might make a deal," chimed in Bradley.

For the third time Pete Nason tried to read the faces of the confessed outlaws. Orton mused that perhaps the two were merely taking this means of trying to discover Peters' real character.

"Well," said the latter as he shrugged a broad, muscular shoulder, "maybe I won't mind throwin' in with you, but it'll have to be after I've done the job my old man sent me here to do."

"Killin' Leighton?" Kirk's eyes chilled.

"That's the job!" declared Nason. "I got to tend to that first."

Bradley gripped a six-shooter but did not draw it.

"We can't let you kill Joe Leighton, Peters!"

"The hell you can't!" Nason thrust forward his face, jaw clamped and eyes hard.

"Not now," drawled Kirk calmly yet with deadly authority.

The newcomer's face blanched a little but he kept his hands away from his weapons.

"What's the reason I can't kill Leighton? I rode all the way from West Texas to do the job, and I'll have to see the colour of the man's eyes that says I can't."

"You see the colour of mine," purred Kirk with a mirthless smile upon his good-looking face.

"And I reckon you've noticed mine are sorter black," declared Bradley with a sneer.

Peters wavered as if he had decided his opponents in this game probably held cards better than his own.

"You ain't makin' yourselves very damned clear."

Orton had already seen that Kirk and Bradley sat, one at each end of the bunk, where they could fire from safe angles, and was certain they would do so provided Peters gave them even a suspicion of cause.

What he heard during the next few minutes, however, informed him that Kirk and Bradley had some scheme in which they could use the handsome, rather youthful newcomer.

"Well, what's your damned game?" Nate Peters demanded. "If we three play we got to turn our cards up on the table. I come a long way to rub out Joe Leighton, and I ain't goin' back without doin' it!"

## CHAPTER TWENTY

As he watched and listened, Bob Orton could not but realize the ruthlessness of these men. He had already decided Peters was no officer masquerading as a bandit. He was not much surprised when he heard Kirk and Bradley confess their reason for not wanting Leighton killed. He also saw Peters' face brighten with interest, but did not know the newcomer had been thinking of pretty Rosita Gonzales and that he had now forgotten her.

"What the hell?" he cried. "You mean to tell me this Leighton's got a pretty girl?"

"If she ain't purty then nobody is!" declared Bradley as his black eyes warmed with the recollection of Lida Leighton.

"Plenty good to look at," nodded Kirk. "But that ain't the point. She's worth anywhere from twenty-five to forty thousand dollars if we can get hold of her."

"Then why don't you grab her?"

Now the two outlaws confessed that they had had the girl captive but had lost her, together with two of their own men.

"Some John Law horn in?" Peters ventured.

"Damned if I know who he was!" Kirk swore. "We seen him a couple times in Mesa Prieta. He shows up just when we was headin' here with the girl, and begins shootin'."

Outside Bob Orton smiled with grim pleasure as he heard himself profanely described.

"If I knowed where that——is now I'd fill him so full of lead his skin wouldn't hold water!" threatened Bradley as he gripped a gun.

In spirit and desire now Pete Nason was a third member of this lawless gang.

"The —— is at the Lazy L right now," said Kirk. "That's where he was headed for with the girl when we missed gettin' him there on the rim."

Bradley and Kirk believed that after their second failure to kidnap Lida Leighton their chance of success was small. They were thinking what to do for a third try when Nason said:

"I can get her for you, boys. I got a way with women even if I do have to say it."

Now Nason was appraised by the would-be kidnappers and by a pair of grey eyes whose presence he did not suspect.

"Maybe you have, Nate," Kirk said cautiously, loathe to divide any ransom into three parts.

"You sure orter have a way with the ladies, Peters," Bradley declared. "You're good-lookin' enough to make 'em fall for you."

"I can handle women!" Nason braced back his shoulders and smiled serenely. "I had some experience with 'em."

As he listened intently, Bob Orton heard it agreed that Peters was to go to the Lazy L. There he would ingratiate himself into the confidence of Leighton and his wife and daughter. This done, he could persuade Lida to accompany him on a ride out on to the range. Once away from the ranch headquarters he could make her a prisoner.

"That ought to be easy," he said without too much enthusiasm, though he thrilled with pleasure and impatience "Maybe it can be done."

"When you fetch her here we can arrange to make old Leighton dig up plenty dinero for her!" swore Kirk. "If he don't come through at first, or comes with riders, it's easy enough to jump across the border with her."

"And maybe later I'll get a chance to rub out Leighton," declared Pete Nason with forced enthusiasm. He had forgotten that in the main he had come to slay Leighton, and was thinking pleasurably of the man's daughter, who was reputed to be very beautiful. He asked for a description of the girl.

"She sounds good," he chuckled after Kirk and Bradley had drawn a word-picture of Lida. "Wish to hell I could've seen her with that green dress on."

"She ain't hard on the eyes," declared Bradley.

"But get this!" commanded Kirk authoritatively. "It's no matter whether she's good on the eyes or not. She's worth dinero to us, and that's what counts. This country's got plenty pretty girls, and a man can get most of any of 'em for a hundred pesos and they'll be glad to make the deal."

"Mex girls," Peters corrected.

"Mex girls. They're good enough for any man when he wants just women. This here's a strict business proposition, Peters. This Leighton girl is white and she's worth big money to us once we get her here."

Pete Nason masked the pleasure of his warming blood by trying to make his face inscrutable as he would have done had he been in a poker game.

"Yeah," he drawled, "this here's a business proposition strictly, and that's what I'm lookin' for."

Bradley began to laugh, puckering his eyes until their black was almost lost in the fat wrinkles.

"Haw, haw!" he trailed off. "Maybe Peters, he's figurin' on makin' love to the girl."

"He can make love to her after we collected good hard ransom money from her old man!" vetoed Kirk.

Though he felt anger and resentment, Nason forced a smile.

"I don't want to make love to any girl there's dinero in!" he declared. "What share of the swag do I get provided I bring her down here?"

Kirk pondered, trying to read this newcomer. He offered a fourth. Nason shook his head, rose, began to make a cigarette after he had tilted his hat over one eye. "It'll have to be a three-way cut or I don't tackle it," he advised grimly.

"Salty as hell, ain't you?" asked Bradley as his right hand again gripped the handle of a pistol.

"It's this way, Peters." Kirk's cold eyes remained steady upon Pete Nason's. "We got this deal all staked out and hobbled, and we already done a lot of work on it, and—"

"You made a failure of it twice," interrupted Nason.

"And we can get rid of you muy pronto and make a success of it the third time!" snapped Kirk. "Don't rope the idea that you amount to so much in this deal, Peters."

From the outside Orton saw Peters' face blanch for a moment, then noticed that though the newcomer kept hands away from guns, his arms were significantly crooked, as if to be ready at an instant's notice.

"Go ahead and grab her!" he said disdainfully. "Then I'll kill her old man. He's the hombre I rode all the way out here to get! I got plenty to keep me busy back in Texas, gents."

Kirk and Bradley exchanged glances, and Orton knew they were trying to decide whether to kill Peters or allow him to attempt the abduction of Lida Leighton. As if confident that he held the winning hand, Pete Nason backed up till his broad back braced against the edge of the rude

doorway. Though he was coldly vigilant, he waited in silence now.

"All right," agreed Kirk. "We'll split the ransom three ways if you fetch her here. That suit you, Peters?"

After a hard smile at the outlaw leader, Nason studied his cigarette. He lifted an inscrutable face.

"That's bueno with me. I don't want the edge on any man's game, but you two have failed twice."

"And he thinks he won't fail," Bob Orton muttered under his breath. Listening, he heard them begin the discussion of details of the coming abduction. Pete Nason had drawn up a rickety stool and faced the others on terms of intimacy now.

"I can head for the Lazy L to-night," he declared at length.

"To-morrow mornin'll be plenty early," said Kirk. "Rest will do you and your horse good."

"Yeah, and we can sort of get acquainted and talk this over some more," Bradley added.

By now Bob Orton had decided against trying to capture Kirk and Bradley immediately. They were to remain here until Peters returned with Lida Leighton. Bob was convinced that Peters would not attempt to kill Lida's father now, not until after the kidnapping at least.

Inside the hut the three men were showing symptoms of restlessness, as if their main problem had been settled. Kirk rose, stretched, yawned, sat down and began to roll a cigarette.

"I think I'd better get out of here while the going is good," Bob told himself, swayed by a desire to see Nate Peters at the Lazy L. There he could unmask Peters and deal with him, later to come back here for Kirk and Bradley.

Creeping slowly round the corner. Orton went as noiselessly as he was able until he had covered a safe distance. He drew in a free breath as he reached the mouth of the canyon down which he had come from the mesa.

Some fifteen minutes later he had reached his horse. Curious now, but with steely determination to thwart this third attempt at kidnapping Lida Leighton, he stole back to the rim, flattened himself The three outlaws were standing companionably before the hut which was now n the shadow that had crawled towards the rough grassy hills to eastward.

Orton was doing some thinking as he lay on the rim. If Nate Peters left at daylight he could not likely reach the

headquarters of the Lazy L before the middle of the afternoon. By starting at once he himself could arrive between midnight and dawn, making due allowance for difficulties he might encounter crossing the broken country after dark.

Orton waited until he saw the three men below stretch out on the dry gramma grass in front of the hut. Back at his horse, Bob reset the saddle and cinched it firmly. He headed in as straight a line as possible for the Lazy L. The sun hung just above the horizon in an aura of myriad shadows and colours. The shadows lengthened their proportions, then vanished. Vagrant gusts of cooling air whispered across the mesas and out of canyons and gullies.

Mocking birds sang from chaparral thickets. One teetered upon the top of a tall bush and tried to fill the dusk with melody. A rattlesnake, beginning its nocturnal search for prey, buzzed warningly as the bay horse climbed a rocky slope. Bob reined up, hesitated for a moment with six-shooter in hand, then guided the horse round the coiled snake.

"You're boss of the road to-night," he told the rattler. "I'm not shooting."

Back beyond the Pecos old Jurd Nason began to fret before Pete had been gone a week. It was time Pete sent word he had killed Joe Leighton.

"But Jurd," his wife protested in her whining voice, "he ain't had time to git to Arizony yet. It's a awful long way out there, and he might've had to do a lot of lookin' for this here man you want him to collect that bill from. Just be patient, Jurd. Gittin' all riled up won't do you no good with your health in the shape it is."

"I ain't sick!" Jurd swore. "Trouble is I don't git decent vittels to eat."

She whiningly protested that she cooked the best they had and cooked it well.

Jurd cursed her and her cooking.

"Fetch me the jug, woman! If I can't git decent vittels I can git decent whisky anyway."

Jurd Nason made two trips to Verde looking for a letter from his son, and on each occasion he filled up on store whisky. Strangely he began to improve to the extent that a little more flesh took root upon his wizened but still sinewy muscles. When he met Dr. Bragg on the street he grinned maliciously, and cursed.

"Bet you a hundred steers I don't turn up my toes inside that year, Doc, durn you!"

"Why, confound your tough old hide, Jurd," chuckled the doctor. "You are looking better."

"Feelin' a durned sight better," Jurd agreed as he pounded his slatty chest with a big, bony fist. "There ain't a durned single part of my innard machinery that's wrong. All she needed was a little more ilin'. I just happened to hit on a remidy as'd cure any ailin' human bein', Doc."

Dr. Bragg said this was what the medical profession had been searching for ever since its beginning. Jurd laughed, a rumbling, hollow sound inside his big, bony chest.

"Mixin' bar likker with moonshine," he confessed. "You take'er plenty and in the right proportions and she'll cure any ill on earth, Doc."

That afternoon as he drove homeward under a burning sun, Jurd let the horses make their own gait along the road that snaked among thickets. He was exulting in the certainty of defying death. Something incurable inside him was there? Well, he'd just show that damned doctor how little he knew. There had been a time when he, Jurd Nason, could toss six doctors around as if they had been six bags of flour. He would do it again.

He was not so exultant, however, when he thought of Pete. He had long known that though Pete was cold and brutal he had never been reliable.

"Durned whelp," he growled. "He'll git out there west somewheres and git to gamblin' and never remember what I sent him for."

It was dusk when he reached home. He climbed painfully from the buckboard and ordered his wife to fetch the jug, then to take care of the team.

When she returned from the lopsided barn she found him sitting in the doorway with feet upon the hard ground and the jug between his knees.

"Jurd," she said, and her watery eyes brightened, "you seem to have perked up a little. Are you feelin' better?"

"Better hell!" he growled at her. "I'm a well man, woman! If I don't hear from Pete in a few more days I'm goin' out to Arizony to collect that there bill myself. I need that money."

In sudden fear and horror she protested that he could not stand the long, hard ride. He would die and she would not

know where he had died. Tears began to stream down her cheeks.

"Stop your blubberin'!" he growled. "I ain't goin' to ride hossback all the way to Arizony. If I don't hear favourable from Pete inside a few days I'm goin' to ride one of them new-fangled railroad cars to as near Mesa Prieta as I can."

After a startled look hope came to her wet eyes and a wan smile to her lips.

"Kin I go along with you, Jurd? I allus did hanker to ride in one of them railroad cars!"

"Naw, you can't!" he snarled. "I'm a-goin' on business and I don't want to be bothered with no woman! Besides, you'll have to stay here and run the ranch. Stop that there blubberin', durn it! I never could put up with a blubberin' woman. Git in the house and hurry up supper. I'm hungry!"

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

As DARKNESS GATHERED Bob Orton began to wonder whether he should go directly to the Lazy L. He remembered that Kirk and Bradley had given such a complete description of the man who had twice thwarted their kidnap attempts that Peters would immediately recognize him. If this recognition occurred at the Lazy L it might result in swift battle and perhaps the death of Lida's father, since that was what Peters had admitted he had come to Arizona to bring about.

By the time night had fallen Orton had decided that the wisest course was to allow Pete to go to the ranch. He experienced a pang of jealousy as he wondered whether Lida would fall in love with the handsome young outlaw from Texas. Then he shrugged.

"If she wants him, then I don't want her."

He turned northwards with some trepidation, though he believed Lida would not be easily kidnapped after the experience she had had. It was not likely that Peters would make an immediate attempt to carry her off by force.

It was well past midnight when Bob pounded upon a door in the Mesa Prieta hotel. Old Sam Minton awoke grumbling and swearing. When he opened the door Orton

saw that he wore a peaked nightcap and a long flannel nightshirt. For the moment grim business fled Bob's mind.

"If it wasn't for those whiskers, Mr. Minton, I'd think I was in my grandmother's room."

"Go to hell!" the old man snorted. "What you doin' here at this time of night anyway? You know where to find a place to sleep without wakin' me up!"

Setting his candle on a stand, Minton scrambled back into bed. He pulled the quilt up to his chin, but let his hoary whiskers lie upon it. Again he ordered Orton to find a room for himself.

"And blow that candle out, too!"

Instead of obeying, Orton sat down, rested his boots on the foot of the bed. He made and lit a cigarette.

"It ain't time for me to git up!" Minton grumbled.

"It's time for you to listen though."

"Listen in the mornin'."

"Right now," the unwelcome guest corrected.

Presently the old man sat upon the edge of the bed wiggling his bare toes with much energy as he listened.

"That ain't what Ely and Davis tells me," he grunted. "They said as how you happened to run into four hombres stealin' Lazy L cattle and up and kilt two of 'em. They fetched in the two. They was planted to-day. You say them four fellers had Lida when you run acrost 'em?"

Bob told of the attempted kidnapping in more detail. The old man's eyes glowed with unbelief while his whiskers bristled belligerently.

"I told that durned fool girl not to take the trail alone! She never will have no sense. Lucky for her I had the foresight to send you to get in ahead of her somewhere."

"Lucky for me, too," Bob said soberly.

"Huh? What you mean? You goin' to fall in love with a headstrong fool like her, Orton? She's sp'iled till the flies'd be swarmin' round her if she wasn't so durned purty and clean. You thinkin' of marryin' her?"

Orton replied with an enigmatic grin.

"Well, if you do you'll sure be lettin' yourself in for plenty trouble! Within a month you won't be able to say your soul's your own, Orton."

"It's been my property for quite a while," Bob grinned.

"Well, what you want? You come in here at two o'clock

in the mornin' jest to tell me this? Why didn't you wait till breakfast time?"

Orton now explained that there was to be a third attempt to kidnap Lida Leighton, and that if this were not successful Lida's father was to be slain.

"Well, why didn't you kill all three of them hellions while you was out there and had the chanct?" Minton demanded. "Was you scared to tackle 'em all at onct?"

Bob said he had another plan, adding that there would have been a grave risk in trying to take Kirk, Bradley and Peters at the same time.

"Didn't you run plenty risk when you jumped them four all at onct?"

"That had to be done," Bob said. "There wasn't time then for strategy."

"Strategy hell! What's this here so-called strategy of yourn now?"

Before Orton could explain the old man demanded to be told what had happened to Lida's new riding-habit.

"It's beyond hope," Bob said, and told how the green habit had been hopelessly torn. Minton wagged his head sadly, and blinked as if he were going to weep.

"Ain't that jest hell? And she was the purtiest thing in it I ever seen on two female laigs, too! Don't you think so, Orton? And she can't never wear that purty dress again, eh? And I was figgerin' on how she'd look if she got married in it. I durned nigh feel like cryin' over that green dress, even if she could have saved it and a whole lot of trouble by stayin' here like I told her to. She treat you decent after you rescued her from them outlaws?"

Again Orton's answer was the puzzling grin.

"She wouldn't!" Minton snorted. "She's so durned sp'iled she don't know what gratitude is. She orter fell on your neck after what you done for her."

Minton picked up his pants from the floor, fumbled till he found a cud of tobacco. As he chewed the tip off his nightcap jerked in one direction while the end of his hoary beard jerked in the other.

"You say this man Peters he comes all the way from Texas to kill Joe Leighton?" he demanded.

Orton said that from what he had heard at the hut, he believed this to be true.

"Then why the hell don't you be at the Lazy L and kill

the——when he shows up there?" Minton asked belligerently. "That'd settle this whole thing once and for all!"

Bob said that as far as Peters was concerned it would, but that it would not bring about the capture of Kirk and Bradley.

"Yeah, that's right," the old man admitted. "That scheme might cause Joe to git kilt, too, provided you didn't git Peters first. I'd most as soon have my own brother kilt as Joe Leighton, I think that much of him, Orton. Well, maybe you got more brains'n Joe's gal."

A few minutes later Minton clumped downstairs, with Orton following. In the lobby the old man turned to the right.

"Gotta have a drink before I can think proper."

He unlocked a door at the right, set the candle on the bar. As the men drank reflection of the candle-flame flickered like a vigilant red sentinel in the dusty back-bar mirror. Minton coughed, heaved a sigh.

"Sorter hit the spot. Helluva time for a white man to have to git out of bed though."

Orton asked whether there was a man at the Lazy L who could be trusted implicitly. Minton took another drink, brightened. He stroked his white whiskers.

"Wouldn't do to let Joe Leighton know this here Peters is out there to kill him and git Lida," he promulgated. Joe's hot-headed, and he'd bust loose and try to kill Peters and likely git hisself kilt first."

"That's what I'm afraid of," said Orton.

Again the old man pondered.

"Joe, he ain't as fast with a pistol as he used to be, and this feller from Texas may be one of them professional gun-slingers. From what I hear there's as many of 'em down that away as there is anywheres." Minton took a third dram, then declared emphatically that Chuck Ely could be trusted.

"Then I'll write him a letter of instructions," Orton declared. "You rustle somebody to take it to him."

The old man agreed, though he still grumbled at Lida because she had been the indirect cause of all his trouble and discomfort. Orton took a candle and went to the lobby where he began writing.

Minton roused the Mexican woman who kept the hotel clean, and told her what he wanted. He bristled like an angry porcupine as he reappeared in the lobby.

"That durned greaser mujer!" he snorted. "She cusses me proper when I pulls her out of bed! She's the durndest sleeper I ever seen!"

Bob poised his pencil, grinned.

"Did you actually pull her out of bed?"

"Did I? Say, if you savvied that fat mujer you'd know the only way to git her up till it's her gittin'-up time is to pull her out. She's gone now to git Tonio."

Bob finished his letter, sealed the envelope.

"Now I want some breakfast," he said.

"Then go out to the kitchen and cook it!" advised the old man. "You rustle me out of bed at two o'clock in the mornin' and then expect me to git hot grub for you, too! I ain't goin' to do it."

Bob said placidly that he would cook his own breakfast.

"Provided you'll let me have the use of your kitchen, Mr. Minton."

"Kitchen! Use the whole durned hotel, but jest lemme go back to bed. Durn that gal! I allus knowed she could cause more trouble'n a headful of Mexican lice, but durned if I ever eemagined she could annoy decent folks like this. I gotta git back and git my beauty sleep."

"Take another drink instead," Bob advised soberly.

The old man squinted one eye, fondled his whiskers.

"Durned if I don't believe I will! It's gittin' too durned late to go back to bed anyhow." He clumped back to the bar-room. When he returned to the lobby he found the charwoman there with a lanky youth with very sleepy eyes.

Clarita doubtless had once been small and pretty, as are most of her kind. Now she was of almost voluminous proportions, with fat and height and breadth. Her full face was still pretty, however, except for an embryo moustache. Her black eyes sparkled as she watched the juggling of silver dollars in Bob Orton's hand.

"Sí, the breakfast I will cook for you, señor," she said happily. "It will not take so ver' many minutes."

Orton stared soberly after her as she waddled towards the kitchen. Then he looked incredulously at the old hotel-keeper.

"You dragged her out of bed, sir?"

The old man braced back his wizened shoulders till all their chronic stoop was gone.

"Durned right I did! Yep, even if she did talk orful to me and kick me onct in the belly. I ain't quite as good a man as I was onct, but durned if there was ever a greaser woman foaled that I couldn't make git up when I set my mind on it."

The old man was more than a little tipsy. He looked owlishly at the sober-faced Mexican youth.

"Didn't I used to be powerful strong, Tonio?"

"Sì, sì, sì!" agreed Tonio. "You are still the muy strong hombre!"

In fluent Spanish Orton gave Tonio his orders. The youth took the sealed letter, but looked doubtful and pathetic. He started for the door, but turned and begged for some breakfast, explaining that he doubted his ability to ride to the Lazy L without food.

"Aw, all right! I'll git him some!" Minton snorted in disgust. "Come on, muchacho."

Bob remained in the lobby, and presently heard Minton shouting orders to which Clarita replied in loud and profane Spanish. Fifteen minutes passed before the old man returned, accompanied by Tonio, who looked happy and satisfied.

"Don't give that letter to anybody but Chuck Ely!" Bob instructed. "And if anybody asks you what it is, just tell 'em it's from Chuck's mother. She is very sick and may want Chuck to come and see her soon. Sabe?"

Tonio said he understood, and without further delay rushed outside to begin a fast, hard ride to the Lazy L.

"Come on, Orton," Minton invited. "I'm goin' to eat with you Let's go and see if that durned fat mujer has anything cooked yet. I'm warnin' you if she talks back to me this time I'm goin' to grab her by the heels and drag her clean out of this place! Me, a white and respectable hotel-man, allowin' a lazy, good-for-nothin' mujer to talk back to me and sass me! Yessir, Orton! I tell you Lida's to blame for all this durned trouble. Take my advice and don't ask her to marry you even if she asks you first. You'll jest be wadin' into trouble up to your fool neck if you do!"

About an hour after Tonio had departed, Bob Orton began his second ride of the Lazy L trail. He had a big canteen and some food on his saddle It was midforenoon when he reached the rim overlooking the Leighton ranch. He saw the Mexican youth climbing the steep part of the trail.

"I am see these damn Señor Ely," Tonio declared

proudly by way of greeting. "He is what you call the muy please and puzzle to get these letter."

"Did you see the señorita?" Bob asked.

There came to Tonio's swarthy face a look of such rapture as to be impossible of translation into ordinary words. He exploded into happy Spanish profanity.

"Madre de Dios, I have see her! Señor, she is so damn' linda there is nobody else like her on todo el mundo, no? She is so damn' linda I am sure she is not there! She is ask me if I have see you!"

"She asked about me, eh?" queried Bob. "What'd you tell her, Tonio?"

"Hah! I have tell her what you tell me to tell her, señor. She is not so damn' linda that she make me tell the lie, or forget my cabeza. She is look like she is in luf with you, señor. You are in luf with her, no?"

"You hit the high spots towards Mesa!" ordered Bob. "Here are five pesos oro for your trouble!"

Tonio wanted to linger to express voluble thanks and to talk more about the señorita at the Lazy L, but again Orton ordered him off. When the youth had disappeared, Bob looked for a place to hide his own horse. This done, he settled himself to wait for Nate Peters.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Bob Orton managed to wait patiently until midafternoon when he saw a rider approaching from the south. Nate Peters, on the good sorrel he had stolen in western New Mexico, passed so near that Bob could have dropped him from the saddle with a six-shooter bullet.

He was swayed from doing this by the knowledge that he had no proof except what he had heard at the hut that Peters was out here to kill Lida's father, and he believed that Leighton was in no immediate danger. Furthermore he doubted that he could take Kirk and Bradley without the unconscious assistance of Peters.

A moment after rider and horse had disappeared over the same rim down which Bob had sent Lida's horse plunging, he rose and hurried to where he could again see Peters. He flattended upon his stomach and looked at the outlaw from

Texas as he leaned gracefully back in the saddle while his horse descended the steep trail to the first narrow bench.

"He is a good-lookin' hombre, and likely some girls would fall for him," Bob mused. "I wonder what effect he will have on Lida?"

He soon found that he had to fight hard to keep from riding down to the Lazy L to accuse Peters of his proposed crimes. Only masterful will and implicit belief in his own plans kept him from doing this.

Orton saw Peters vanish among the trees that surrounded the ranch buildings, then returned to his hiding-place to begin an indefinite wait. He did not know how long he would have to stay here doing nothing, and was not unmindful of the possibility that after all Peters might kill Joe Leighton immediately, capture Lida and take some other route back to the hut where he had left Kirk and Bradley.

"I'll just have to take chances on that," Bob told himself with reluctant resignation. "I still believe this is the best bet."

Many times Pete Nason had rehearsed manners and speech as he had heard and seen them used by Cass Harden, the gambler he had wantonly killed. Now as he rode up to the ranch-house he was selfassured, even arrogant. His attire was expensive even for a cowboy or young rancher, and a trifle colourful. He reined up, doffed his Stetson to the matronly woman who sat in a rocking chair on the broad gallery.

"Howdy, ma'am," he said politely. "I am Nathan Peters, from Texas. Might I ask whether this is the Lazy L ranch?"

Jane Leighton smiled, rose. She told him this was the Lazy L.

"Won't you get off and rest, Mr. Peters?" she invited, for all reputable looking comers were welcome here.

Peters dismounted, brushed dust from his clothes, smiled. He took Mrs. Leighton's hand when she offered it.

"Maybe I don't look quite right toting these pistols, ma'am," he apologized "but back home I sort of got used to 'em, and now I don't feel quite right without 'em."

Mrs. Leighton laughed and said it was the custom of the country for riders to go armed. She invited Peters to sit down.

Joe Leighton was working on some ranch accounts in

his office, but came to the porch when he heard voices. Looking at the sturdy and indomitable-appearing rancher, Pete Nason flinched as he recalled that this was the man he had come from Texas to kill.

"This is my husband, Mr. Peters," Jane Leighton said with pride and affection.

Nason met the probing look of the squinted blue eyes.

"Glad to meet you, Peters," Leighton said hospitably. "If you are lookin' for a job I reckon I can use another rider."

As if a little embarrassed, the visitor explained that he was not looking for work. He had tired of ranching in his native state and had come west in search of a good range where he might settle and build up a herd. As proof of his means to do this he jingled gold-pieces in a trousers pocket.

"There's plenty good range left out this way," Leighton said. "Let's sit down and talk about it. You're welcome to stay here as long as you care to, Mr. Peters."

"Of course," Mrs. Leighton agreed.

Pete Nason smiled at them in genuine appreciation of this hospitality.

"That's sure mighty kind of you," he said feelingly, but the next moment was thinking of the sinister business that had brought him here.

"Mr. Peters says he is from Texas you know, Joe," the rancher's wife said pleasurably. "I wonder if you were ever in Verde, Mr. Peters?"

Pete looked thoughtful, though he wanted to laugh in their faces at the deceit he was perpetrating. He shook his sleek black head and said.

"I never happened to be there, folks."

In his eager enthusiasm he did not notice that in the doorway of the bunk-house a grisled cowboy sat as if ill. Nor did he suspect that within reach of the cowboy's hand, and just out of sight, a rifle leaned. Chuck Ely had feigned illness that morning to make sure he was here when needed.

"Slick lookin'——," he muttered now. "Reckon that's him all right. Folks appear right glad to meet up with him."

Reminded of their former home by the arrival of the man from Texas, Leighton and his wife named several persons they had known in Verde and its vicinity. At the mention of each name Pete smiled apologetically and shook his head while under his moustache a smile of contempt flickered.

"By golly," chuckled Leighton, "I wonder if Jurd Nason is still alive? He was the toughest nut I ever met up with in all my life. Jane, do you remember Jurd Nason?"

At the mention of the name Mrs. Leighton had laughed, but now she was rosy and there was a mirthful twinkle in her eyes.

"Oh, yes! I remember Jurd. He wanted me to marry him very much."

"Too danged bad for you you didn't," her husband told her soberly.

"I believe it was," she said and smiled at him.

Pete found he had to resort to all his cultivated poker inscrutability and unconcern to hide his rage. Hot fury was boiling inside his head. They were making fun of his own father, damn them! He forgot that he seldom felt any affection or respect for Jurd himself and remembered only that he had come here to kill this rancher and had been persuaded to first kidnap the rancher's pretty daughter.

"It looks like you did mighty well in choosing a husband, Mrs. Leighton," he said after a moment.

Before she could reply there was the sound of light footsteps, footsteps for which Nason had impatiently waited. He looked up to see a slender girl standing in the doorway. She was dressed in a simple dark blue, and Pete made quick note that her eyes, too, were blue, with touches of violet.

"Hallo there, Lida," said her brusque father. "Thought it was about time you was showin' up to see who was here. Come out and meet Mr. Nate Peters from back in Texas."

When she had heard the voice of the stranger Lida had thought at first Bob Orton had returned. She had dressed carefully though in a little haste. Now as she saw that Orton had not come she did not know whether to be glad or angry. He had declared he would be back.

As Nason rose to accept her soft, tapered hand he saw her colour and regard him demurely through lowered lashes and he forgot that he was to kill her father and that he had come to steal her and help hold her a captive until a fat ransom was paid for her release.

"It is a great pleasure to meet you, Miss Leighton," he said as he believed Cass Harden would have said it. To himself he was saying she was by far the most beautiful, the

most desirable girl he had ever seen. Rosita was not deuce high to this queen.

"I am pleased to know you, Mr. Peters," Lida said, and was even more demure. She was not schooled enough, however, to conceal from him a flash of daring and coquetry in her eyes and scant smile. He stepped gallantly aside and asked her to sit down.

"If I won't be intruding——" she said doubtfully.

"You certainly will not be," he told her. "I am the one who is intruding."

He did not resume his chair until she had taken another. Then he wondered whether he were conducting himself as a gentleman should. One thing gave him no cause for doubt, however. He knew he was already head-over-heels in love with Lida Leighton.

"Kidnap her!" he mentally scoffed during a lull in the conversation. "Hell! I'm going to marry her. Rub out her old man? I reckon not! He'll be worth a lot more to me alive than Jurd would pay me for killin' him."

By the time the sun had set and the heat had begun to leave the basin, Lida was acting as if she had known the handsome young man from Texas for more than an hour or two. They were under the cottonwoods where Bob Orton had taken her in his arms and told her she was going to marry him.

"I'm going to like Arizona," Nason declared.

"It's not such a bad country," Lida returned, "but there are lots of things and people out here you won't like."

"You're not one of them," Pete assured her with bold confidence. "That's one thing I'm dead sure about, Miss Leighton."

Lida's heart fluttered with doubt, then with fear, then with hope. Was this man going to swoop her into his arms and tell her she was going to marry him, as Bob Orton had done?

It was shortly before dawn of the third day following Nason's arrival at the Lazy L when Bob Orton heard a horse approaching his small fire, built well back from the rim. He did not grip a six-shooter, but kept a hand ready.

"Hey, you, Orton!" called a cautious voice. "You here?"

"Here!" Bob answered, wondering whether his wait here were to be ended.

Chuck Ely dismounted at the edge of the firelight. Bob tossed a little dry fuel on the coals.

"Well, what's happened?" Bob Orton asked trying to hide his worry and impatience.

Instead of answering, the grisled old rider regarded the tall young man doubtfully.

"How you manage to keep so durned clean out here without no proper cook and no barber?"

Bob explained that he had brought his shaving outfit, and that he had made three trips to a spring to fill his canteen.

"It wasn't hard, Chuck. I didn't have anything else to do. Now what's happened at the ranch?"

"What's happened?" Ely repeated in disgust and rage. "Plenty! Lida, she's fell head-over-heels in love with that flossy —— from Texas! My gosh, they're already actin' like they was married almost. It's the fust time I ever seed her total fall for a man. She's actin' like a durned fool over him."

As he listened Bob felt hot, jealous rage engulf him, but realized that if he were to thwart the sinister plot and take its perpetrators he must keep his head.

"Did you expect her to make a durned fool of herself by fallin' in love with this here ——?" Ely demanded.

"I din't think much about that part, Chuck. My aim is to save her and her father."

"Then you'd best be gittin' busy pronto, Orton," Ely grunted, "or the fust thing we know them two'll be headin' for Mesa to git married."

Orton said he thought there was little danger of this occurring soon, but wondered whether Lida was that fickle after all. Still, she had never professed to love him, in fact she had said emphatically that she did not.

Ely had drunk coffee from a tin can, and was gnawing on a strip of dried beef when he declared, as if he had forgotten something important:

"That durned Peters, he tells her last night as how he's gotta go away to-day on some business."

Bob's bronzed face showed neither surprise nor grim pleasure. He believed he knew where Peters was going to-day—to consult with Kirk and Bradley. Perhaps, after all, the kidnapping plot had not been abandoned.

As the lean old cowboy had said he could return to

headquarters by a roundabout route, he and Orton talked until sunshine struck the mesa.

"Let's go and take a look, Chuck," Bob suggested.

Walking to the rim, they found screens of brush and rocks. They had waited only a little longer than it had taken the sunshine to brighten the trees about the ranch buildings when they saw two riders appear and head towards the westerly rim. Bob Orton said nothing, but his eyes narrowed to slits and his mouth formed a hard line.

"Durned if that ain't her with him!" Ely swore after they had watched for ten minutes. "Told you she was goin' to Mesa to git married. I never did see sech a fool-girl in my life!"

"Yes," Bob agreed slowly. "I reckon they are going to Mesa to get married."

He did not tell that probably Peters had persuaded Lida to go for a ride and that once away from the ranch he would take her captive and hurry with her to the hut where Kirk and Bradley waited.

"You get out of here, Chuck," Bob ordered. "I want to handle this business alone."

"Me?" demanded the old rider. "No siree! I'm stayin'."

Bob turned to look squarely at the old man and his eyes were like slits of grey steel.

"You take one of those other trails back to the ranch, Chuck!" His voice was gentle but there was a crackle of authority in it. "I'm perfectly able to do all the talking necessary to Peters and Miss Lida Leighton."

Ely grimaced, hesitated as he tried to read the younger face. Then he began to worm his way backward from the rim. He got to his feet when he was sure he could not be seen from the lower trail.

"All right," he agreed reluctantly. "I'll ride off yonder maybe a mile or so, but if there's any shootin' I'm coming back."

"Come back if you hear shots," said Orton. "Now vamos, Chuck."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

UNDER ordinary circumstances Orton would have disdained the role of watcher and listener. Now he was determined to save a man's life, and to eventually capture or kill the outlaw who was here to take it. He ceased temporarily to hold affection for the girl, and regarded her impersonally. She was merely a pretty young woman now, and he was going to see what she would do under a given set of conditions. Nevertheless he was determined to stop her if she actually planned to go to Mesa Prieta with Peters.

The man was the first to top the rim. He rode a few yards on the level, then turned his horse to watch the girl. As she came into view on her sorrel pony Bob saw she wore a blue riding-habit. It was a little worn, though not enough to keep her from decorating it. Her eyes were bright and her cheeks flushed as if she had exerted as much energy in the climb as had her horse.

Fifty yards away Orton lay back of a flat boulder which fortunately had a slanting mahogany bush draped over it. He mused grimly that Peters was a good-looking fellow and that he appeared well on a horse. He was graceful in a saddle, and had the air of a born horseman. He was smiling tentatively at Lida. To Orton it looked as if he was sure he did not have to give her all his time to impress her favourably.

"I always like that last steep pitch," the girl said with a laugh. "It makes me think of the finish of a race."

"Maybe it's just about the beginning of ours," ventured Peters as he smiled meaningly at her.

She did not reply. Orton thought she stiffened a little in the saddle. He poked the end of his rifle an inch farther across the boulder.

"Worrying about something?" asked Peters. "If you are——"

"Not about a thing," Lida replied with a lift of chin. "What makes you think I'm worrying?"

"Why," Peters drawled, and his lids narrowed, "I thought you might be a little sorry because I have to be away for a day or two."

Bob Orton removed forefinger from the trigger of

the Winchester. This was not to be the kidnapping attempt then. It was not an elopement to Mesa Prieta.

"Oh," the girl retorted with some spirit, "I guess I can get along without you for a few days."

She still kept her chin up, and as Orton had a side view of their faces he wondered whether this were a challenge of some sort. He saw Peters' tanned face pale a little. Then the outlaw from Texas smiled and said:

"Sure you can get along, but ain't you going to miss me a little?"

"Yes, I'll miss you."

Spurring and neck-reining his horse simultaneously, Peters grasped Lida's wrist. As the outlaw and his horse cut off view of the girl, Orton could not tell whether she attempted to resist.

"But you'll kiss me good-bye, girl?" Peters demanded huskily.

Bob Orton could barely hear her answer:

"Why should I?"

"Because I want you to! Say, do you think I don't know how you feel after the good amigos we've been down at the ranch?"

"I have been kind to you," Lida said, her eyes steady upon his. "I would be kind to any presentable stranger, yes, any stranger."

"You mean you don't like me?" Peters demanded, and tightened his hold on her wrist.

From his place of concealment Orton found that he was watching a drama fraught with suspense. His fore-finger was again on the trigger of the rifle. He released the slight pressure.

"I haven't had time to decide whether I like you or not," Lida replied.

Peters seemed to tense in his saddle He leaned towards her, but as he started to sweep an arm about her she freed her wrist from his grasp, and at the same time spurred away, reining the sorrel pony back and to the left.

Bob lifted a little that he might see her more clearly. She was very pale, and he did not know whether she were icy with contempt or white-hot with anger. He heard her plainly when she ordered:

"Don't try that again, Mr. Peters! You needn't get the notion that I'm entirely an easy mark."

"Easy mark?" Peters echoed with apology. "Say, I think you are about the nicest girl in the world, Lida."

"Miss Leighton to you," she corrected, looking straight at him and still pale.

"All right, Miss Leighton. May I come back to see you?"

"You may come back to the ranch if you like," she answered with less indignation, and from the distance Bob could see her lips form a little smile. "Now, since you have a long ride to make, maybe you'd better be going."

"I believe I'll likely be back to-night." Peters said after he had studied her for a half-minute. "Yeah, I'll be back around dark."

"Then I wish you the best of luck in buying those steers," said the girl. "Don't let that greaser ranchero skin you out of your hide."

Pete Nason, alias Peters, rolled a cigarette, revealing more plainly than before the holstered revolvers at his lean hips. He lit the cigarette, exhaled copiously through narrow nostrils. He shrugged.

"I reckon I'm able to take care of myself in most any kind of company, Miss Leighton. What do you think about it?" His voice, a little louder than the average, carried plainly to where Bob Orton lay. Bob's lips twisted.

"Don't think much of himself, does he?" he asked sarcastically He could see that the girl was studying the face of the man whose back was still towards the hiding-place.

"I don't know just what I think about it, Mr. Peters," Lida said as she moved a shoulder in a slight shrug. "Perhaps I can tell you better when you get back to the ranch. Now adios."

"And hasta luega?" queried Peters as his narrowed eyes twinkled at her.

"Adios," repeated the girl. "I wish you luck on that cattle deal."

"Not in anything else?"

"I said I wished you luck on the cattle deal!" she repeated a little impatiently, and began to turn her horse. "Adios."

With tight rein Peters half turned his animal, poised spurs as if to follow and take what he wanted—her kiss. In that pose he had momentarily shaken off his thin

veneer of gentleness and politeness. To Orton he looked even more deadly and crafty than when he had been at the lonely hut with Bradley and Kirk.

"Adios," he accepted with a shrug, and seemed with it to try to free himself of anger and frustration. "I'll likely be seein' you to-night, Miss Leighton."

Lida did not turn, but seemed to be interested in something down the trail. After another long look at her Peters caught the sides of his horse with the rowels and started southward. Behind his rock Bob Orton sneered:

"Going to make a cattle deal, eh? Well, I wish you more luck than I think you'll have, Mr. Peters!"

Orton was convinced now that Peters' attempted love-making was merely a ruse. The kidnapping plot had been retained, and the Texan was now on his way to report his progress to Kirk and Bradley so they could agree upon some spot where they could meet him and the girl when she was his prisoner.

"All right," Orton muttered as he looked at the retreating outlaw, "I'll just let you get a reasonable lead."

Bob looked back to the rim and discovered that Lida was still there but that she no longer watched the long, broad valley that was the best part of the Lazy L range. She had turned her pony to parallel the rim, and from her look she might have never known that Nate Peters was in the vicinity. She was looking with apparent eagerness and longing at the crooked trail that led towards Mesa Prieta, as if debating with herself whether to take it.

Bob wondered whether he should stop her if she started towards the border town. He shrugged.

"I guess not. She'd tell me in very plain language just where I could go."

When he was a hundred yards away Peters stopped, wheeled his horse half round, and called confidently:

"Adios, querida!"

At the sound Lida turned, saw that he had a hand lifted.

"Adios!" she answered, then reined about quickly and used the spurs to send the pony over the rim and out of sight.

As she went Bob Orton cursed himself for not having tackled the three outlaws when he had had them penned in the adobe hut. Now he might not find it as easy to get them where he could use his guns upon them.

"I'll let you get a half-mile lead, Señor Peters," he told himself He waited until the outlaw had disappeared a quarter-mile away, then rose and walked to the rim. As he gained it he sat down where he could not be seen from below. He saw that Lida was now at the end of the steep descent. She put her horse to a gallop. A thin stream of dust rose from under the hoofs of the pony.

Watching her, Bob tried to decide whether she had definitely spurned Peters or subtly encouraged him. He felt a little bitter when he recalled that he himself had not been hospitably invited to return to the Lazy L. After ten minutes he rose and walked to where he had left his horse safely hidden.

As he rounded a clump of chaparral he stopped, flashed right hand to six-shooter. There was his horse, but near it stood a man. It took Orton a moment to recognize Chuck Ely. The old rider was grinning.

"Just hung around so's I'd be sure to hear shots if they come," he explained. "There wasn't no trouble?"

Orton told how Peters was riding southwards and Lida was on her way back to the ranch. He could not confess all he had heard and seen, however.

"Well, what you goin' to do now?" Ely asked doubtfully.

"I'm going after Peters."

The grizzled cowboy figuratively pricked up his ears, and approbation came into his squinted eyes.

"Want me to ride along? I'd sure admire to."

Orton replied that he would go alone. Disappointment made Ely's countenance doleful.

"You're the doctor," he agreed. "What you want me to do?"

"Get back to the ranch, Chuck," Bob said, "and ride hard on her but don't let her know it."

"Bet your life I won't let her know it!" laughed the old rider. "If she 'spected I was lookin' out for her she'd do jest the thing we don't want her to. I reckon I'm goin' to be so awful sick for the next two-three days I can't ride the range a-tall, Bob."

"Two or three days will do." Bob offered his hand. "Now I've got to be on my way. Adios, and take good care of Lida."

"Huh!" Ely snorted. "If she figgered I was tryin' to

take any sort of care of her she'd up and make Joe fire me. Adios and good luck."

Though resolved to postpone encounter with the outlaws until after dark, possibly until the coming dawn, Bob Orton was spurred on by impatience, and by some doubt. He had no way of knowing whether Peters was actually going to the lonely hut. After all he and Kirk and Bradley may have agreed on some other rendezvous.

He had little difficulty in finding the trail left fresh by the shod hoofs of Peters' horse. As the sun mounted higher and higher he caught occasional glimpses of horse and rider, only to see them disappear into some canyon or over some rocky ridge.

Orton knew his immediate problem was to see without being seen. Sometimes he was a mile behind Peters, sometimes only half that distance. The sun was burning down from a cloudless sunny sky before he was sure Peters was headed for the adobe hut in the little hidden valley.

There was not a great distance left to travel. Bob slowed his horse, and a little later stopped in a brushy draw where there was good concealment for the animal. He saw Peters and his sorrel climb to the small mesa from which he himself had first discovered the drab adobe hut against the sandstone wall.

Orton awoke to action a minute after Peters had gone from view. Spurring from the thicket, he galloped down the slope, crossed a grassy depression. Reaching the little mesa, he jumped from his saddle, dropped the reins. He crouched, then crawled as he neared the northerly rim. He was just in time to see Peters stopping his horse in front of the shack.

Jack Kirk and Bradley had come out, alert and prepared for trouble as they had heard the tramp of a horse. They greeted Peters cordially but with some reserve and doubt.

"Well, what luck'd you find, Nate?" Kirk demanded.

"The best in the world, I reckon," Pete Nason drawled, and smiled confidently.

As he swung to the ground he turned his back upon the men before the cabin, but as his feet touched the ground he jerked both pistols from their holsters, whirled and fired. As if two swift and unexpected thunderbolts had crashed from the hot cloudless sky, one bullet went through Bradley's heart and the other missed Kirk's by an inch.

From where he lay Bob Orton thought he could see thin wisps of smoke curling upwards from the muzzles of the six-shooters Nate Peters held at his hips. He could imagine, too, that he saw the Texan's lip curl back, but he could not hear when the outlaw snarled:

"There you—es! I guess that'll show you who's to have that girl!"

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

DESPITE the horror Bob Orton experienced at witnessing this brutal and unprovoked double murder, his mind instantly caught at least part of Peters' reason for it. He wanted to play a lone hand here, one in which he would not have to divide with the other outlaws. Perhaps he had decided to kidnap Lida alone, or perhaps he had some other sinister plan by which he would profit.

After he had disappeared into the hut Orton considered making an attempt to capture him at once, but decided that so far he had nothing against him except that he had killed two other outlaws.

Orton's pleasure at the realization that Kirk and Bradley were out of the way was only partial. He had planned to deal with them himself. He saw Peters come from the hut and bend over one dead man, then the other.

"Going through their pockets," Orton muttered in disgust as he drew a bead on Peters. "No, I'll wait and see what he does next."

To Orton it was apparent that Peters did not intend to remain here long, for he worked hastily. Orton had already decided that he must arrive at the Lazy L ahead of the outlaw. Getting his horse, he left the mesa by the route he had used in coming to it, but once off the tableland he rode for the shelter of a ridge to westward. He did not ride fast, but consistently, for he believed Peters would not hurry to reach the Leighton ranch.

It was a little after midnight when Bob Orton stopped his tired horse upon the low rim and looked down into the wide basin where the headquarters of the Lazy L lay in darkness. Not a light shone there. The moon was not shining, but the myriad stars shed a little illumination, enough to

permit the Lazy L horse to pick its way down the steep trail and quicken its gait towards home and feed.

Because of prearrangement, Chuck Ely had moved his blankets to a spot under a cottonwood behind the big barn. He awoke as he heard the tramp of a horse, sat up, gripped a pistol.

"It's just me, Chuck!" Orton called.

The oath of relief and pleasure the old rider uttered was very audible.

"Say, don't you ever sleep, you son-of-a-gun?"

Tired and hungry, Orton slid from the saddle, removed gear and loosed the horse. He squatted beside Ely's hard bed.

"I'm figuring on a good long sleep to-morrow night," he said.

"Durned if I believe it," Ely declared. "Don't think you ever need sleep."

"On the contrary," Orton corrected, "I feel as if I need about two wagon-loads of it."

"Well, any luck?"

Orton told of the murders he had witnessed. Ely stiffened, swore.

"The hell! Why didn't you kill Peters? He sure had it comin'."

"He'll come back here," Bob said.

"And maybe try to kill Joe, too!"

"He won't try to do that for a while," Orton declared. "He has some other game. I don't know just what it is though."

Ely's eyes tried hard to see the face of the younger man as more than a blur in the darkness.

"And you figger to be here and set in his game, eh?" he asked.

"I'll be here," said Orton. "Now what about renting me half those blankets?"

Leighton always made it a point to see that all his riders were off for work a little past daylight. His custom was to leave the ranch-house by the rear, go to cook-house and bunk-house to deliver his orders for the day, then take a look at the corrals and barns. This morning, a trifle before sunrise as he returned to the ranch-house he saw a man lolling on one of the comfortable chairs on the front porch. He stopped, looked hard.

"That Peters come back?" he asked himself. Then as he resumed his slow walk his features relaxed into a smile.

It was almost the exact minute that a stage arrived from Aravaca. Dennison pulled his horses up before the Mesa Prieta hotel with his usual flourish. The customary crowd was on hand to greet the stage, and Mesa saw that this trip Dennison had brought two passengers. One climbed stiffly yet resolutely from the coach and tottered a little as he stood upon the board-walk.

The other was a very pretty girl. As the old hotelman appraised her he decided she was not all Mexican. She smiled doubtfully, wearily.' Minton looked at the other passenger. That old man, except for indomitable fire burning in his eyes, looked about ready to die.

With no prearrangement whatever, but animated by a common purpose in one respect, Jurd Nason and Rosita Gonzales had taken the same train from Verde. It had not been until they had been aboard an hour that Jurd had recognized the girl.

"Where you goin'?" he had demanded.

She had told him frankly that she was going to find his son.

"What for, gal?"

"I am going to marry him," Rosita had replied. "He has not written to me the letters he promised. I am the very much worry about him, Señor Nason."

Jurd had eyed Rosita keenly for a long time, decided she looked like a good girl even if she were half Mexican. He had mused that any girl was a good girl if she was willing to travel far and into an unknown country to find the man she loved.

"Sure wish she was lookin' for a better one than Pete," he had growled to himself. "But if she wants him that's her look out. She's a durned sight better'n he is."

Jurd did not confess he had decided Pete would not execute the orders given him, that he, Jurd himself, would have to settle the old fancied score with Joe Leighton.

"Durned if I don't sorter git the notion she'll make a fust-rate darter," he declared, then told her the same, adding:

"You come along with me, Rosita, and I'll see we find Pete and he sure treats you right."

Resolute in her love, yet frightened, especially after she had discovered that Pete's father was a passenger on the same

train with her, Rosita gladly accepted the old man's protection though she marvelled that it should have been offered.

Now as they stood tired and dusty in front of the Mesa Prieta hotel, she kept close to the old man.

"You know a young feller round here named Pete Nason?" Jurd growled.

Rosita's brown eyes shoné hopefully as she awaited the answer, but clouded with disappointment when Minton replied that he did not know anybody by that name.

"But he may be——" began the girl eagerly, then hesitated as she realized she had better refrain from disclosing Pete's alias.

"What was that you was goin' to say, Rosita?" Jurd prompted with a smile for her that was as near to being gentle as he could make it.

"I—I was goin' to say that perhaps he did not come this way," the girl faltered as she feared the man she loved had not come west at all. Mother of God, if he had deceived her!

"We'll find him!" Jurd growled, wanting to curse. "Likely he didn't show up here in town. Is there a ranch round these parts owned by a feller named Joe Leighton, hombre?"

"Sure there is!" Minton declared. "It's the Lazy L and she's the biggest cattle spread in this part of the territory. You know Leighton?"

"Know Leighton!" Jurd growled. "You got some breakfast for us two, mister?"

Minton replied that breakfast would be ready soon.

"Then I'll hustle round and hire us a couple of saddle horses," said old Jurd. "But fust I've got to git me a drink or two. You sell likker, mister?"

When Minton replied that he did, Jurd turned and asked the girl whether she cared for some whisky.

"No, no, Señor Nason!" she cried in confusion and embarrassment. "If el señor will show me where I may wash some of the dust from my face and hands——"

"Sure, I'll show you," Minton agreed.

Instead of doing so, however, he found Clarita. The maid placed large hands upon large hips and appraised the girl.

"Caramba!" she declared. "You are muy bonita! Come with me and you shall be the mas bonita when you have washed your face, no?"

"Daughter?" Minton asked when he faced Nason across the bar.

Old Jurd downed his whisky and asked for another.

"She's goin' to marry my boy," he grunted. "That—— comes out here to tend to some business for me. I come out to see how he done it."

After they had drunk again Minton went to the outside of the bar where he could get a better look at this newcomer, once a powerful man it was evident, but now one of mere skin and bones. At the skinny man's right hip was a worn holster filled by an old forty-five Colt.

"Joe Leighton," declared the hotel-man, "is one of my best amigos, and seein' as how you're his friends I'll see you git saddle hosses. Have another dram, Nason?"

"Two," corrected Jurd as hate began to fire anew in his savage brain. "It allus takes about four to heat me up proper for breakfast. That ain't bad likker."

"Best in town," announced Minton, and watched Jurd down a third drink. Jurd refilled his glass, lifted it to see the "bead" in the light that filtered through a dusty window.

"Make a durned sight better moonshine back in Texas," he growled, "but this here'll do. Yeah, Joe Leighton and me used to be 'most like brothers."

"Then Joe'll be a heap pleased to see you again," said Minton. "He never went back on a friend, old or new."

"He used to be that away," agreed Jurd as he lifted the glass to his lips and thought that within a few hours he would kill Joe Leighton, if Pete had not already done that brutal job.

The rancher advanced quickly when he recognized the man on the porch.

"Well, well, Orton, when did you get back? Glad to see you again."

"And I'm glad to be back, thank you," Bob returned as they shook hands. "May I ask whether your daughter and Mrs. Leighton are up?"

"Shucks," laughed the rancher, "they won't be out of bed tor an hour yet. Why do you ask, Orton?"

Bob had decided he must make as full an explanation as possible. Before he had finished it the rancher was standing grim and rigid yet still incredulous.

"You saved my daughter from men who had stolen her?" he demanded.

"As I said," Bob answered.

Leighton soon looked as if he believed. He smiled, nodded.

"I noticed she seemed sort of interested in you, Orton. Now tell me about this man Peters. You say he is out here to kill me because of some old grudge his father had against me?"

Orton detailed what he had heard while he had listened at the hole in the end of the adobe hut. Leighton shook his head.

"I never knew any man named Peters back in the Verde country, Orton."

"Did you ever have trouble enough with any man there to make him want to hunt you up and kill you?"

Leighton pondered. He shook his head again.

"Not that I can recall. Why, man, it's been twenty years since I left Verde, Texas. Lida was just a baby. This here puzzles me a heap."

"It might have puzzled me, too, if I hadn't seen the way he killed those two hombres down south there yesterday," Bob said.

He was certain there would be another killing, possibly more, and his great desire now was that neither Lida nor her mother should witness it. He was certain, too, that this killing would occur before many hours had passed.

"Isn't there some place your wife and daughter can go for to-day, Mr. Leighton?" he asked. "It won't do for them to head for Mesa."

"You don't want them to see me kill this rascal Peters, eh?" Leighton growled.

Orton smiled enigmatically.

"It will be much better if they don't have to see any gun play, sir."

After a thoughtful minute the rancher said there was a very sick Mexican woman up the valley some ten miles.

"Her man works for me, looks after the waterholes on that part of the range."

"Then why not say word has come that your wife and daughter are needed there?" Bob suggested. "Will they be willing to go under such conditions?"

The rancher grinned.

"Say, you don't know Jane and Lida, man! If either one of 'em suspected there was somebody sick within ten

miles they'd sure head for there pronto to see what they could do. Yeah, you're right it will be better if they ain't here when I have to kill that man Peters, the scoundrel! So he was goin' to try to kidnap Lida, was he?"

"I am the one to take care of Peters." Bob said coolly.

Leighton looked hard for what seemed minutes.

"I'll kill Peters," he corrected. "It's my family that's involved."

He started towards the front door but turned.

"Maybe it will be better, under the circumstances, for you to keep out of sight till my wife and Lida get away, Orton."

"I think it will be," Bob agreed.

Before he had made complete disclosure to Leighton, Bob had known it would be hard, if not impossible, to persuade the rancher it was not his work to deal with Peters. He believed that Leighton, who was past middle age, would prove unequal to matching successfully the swift deadliness Peters had demonstrated there in front of the lonely little hut.

For less than a minute now, Bob Orton pondered. Before many more minutes had passed he was astride his horse, riding hard towards the steep trail that led to the rim and then to the little border town from where old Jurd Nason and Rosita Gonzales were already coming.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

No THOUGHT of currying favour prompted Bob Orton in the course he took. He had begun a job alone, and he meant to finish it alone if he could.

He realized that at any moment he might meet Peters coming down the trail. At the beginning of the first steep climb there were some large mesquites thriving in the fertile dry soil that had collected there. Orton reined among these small trees, sat his saddle.

While he watched the ranch headquarters, he kept his ears alert for any sound up the trail. He had waited half an hour before he saw a rig appear from the trees and start northwards. There were two persons on the seat.

"Lida and her mother." he told himself. "I wonder if there is any use of their going."

He was aware that Peters might return to the ranch by another route, although he did not believe the Texan was any more familiar with the country than he himself.

After making sure the rig was actually heading up the basin, Orton climbed to the rim. After surveying the mesa, he rode on to the spot where he had waited for Chuck Ely to come to report. Coyotes and bobcats had thoroughly searched the ground about the remains of his small fire.

Leaving his horse here, Orton walked back to the rim, taking his rifle with him. He had decided to sit and wait in the open when he recalled the wanton brutality with which Peters had killed Bradley and Jack Kirk.

He looked at his watch before he sat down behind some rocks ten yards from where the trail dipped over the rim. Its hands indicated ten minutes before nine.

Occasionally he turned his head to follow the course of the rig up the basin. The fast-moving dust-cloud told him that possibly Lida was driving. He did not give a great deal of thought to the girl now, though he could not keep her picture entirely from his mind.

After two long hours he saw a rider top a grushy rise on the mesa a few hundred yards to southward. He waited to see him more clearly, then muttered grimly:

"Peters all right. I thought he'd head for here. He's just cold-blooded enough to have a good sleep before he took to the saddle again."

It did not require long for Orton to see that the approaching horseman was fully armed with rifle and six-shooters. He had probably taken the rifle from one of the outlaws he had murdered. Orton knew he had not carried one when he had ridden into the little hidden valley where the hut was located.

"Why, the—— has even got a shave somewhere! He looks all cleaned up, too."

Though Peters had probably ridden twenty-five miles over rough broken country since daylight, he was indeed clean and his clothes seemed to have escaped much brush and dirt. His Stetson sat at a slight angle, as if he had carelessly put it there. His moustache seemed carefully combed, and as the distance shortened Bob noticed it was twisted to spikes at its ends. Peters rode with the same swaggering self-assurance Orton had noted when he had seen him before.

"It'll be a shame to muss up a pretty boy like that," Bob told himself, but without levity.

The outlaw was within ten yards of the trail he obviously meant to descend when Bob rose, putting the upper part of his body into plain view. As if he had bumped against some unseen branch or rock, Peters stiffened, jerked his horse to a stop. His right hand flashed towards a pistol, stopped just short of its yellowed bone handle.

"Howdy," he said gruffly, looking hard at Orton.

Bob stepped quickly from back of the rock.

"Howdy, Peters," he drawled calmly. "I thought I'd meet you here about this time of day."

"Well, you met me," Peters agreed. He was trying to decide whether this was one of the cowboys he had seen at the Lazy L. Then he began to tense forward slowly as his face hardened and his eyes narrowed.

"Yes, I'm the man who spoiled the little game Kirk and his men figured to play," Orton informed coolly. He smiled, but it was not a mirthful change of expression. There was something grim and ominous in the twist of his lips.

Peters seemed not entirely convinced, but his hand moved closer to the handle of his right gun.

"And if you want it all," continued Bob, "I happened to be watching when you murdered Kirk and Bradley yesterday afternoon."

In amazement Peters let his hand jerk away from the pistol and towards the horn of his saddle.

"Huh?" he demanded with an oath. "What you talkin' about? Where'd I kill any two men?"

Before Orton could begin to reply Pete Nason's right hand was streaking back towards his right sixshooter, but it was lacking in speed compared with the action of Bob Orton's hands.

Even as Nason fired he was shortening in his seat and slipping to the right. The murderous Colt slipped from his fingers, and he pitched to the ground. Orton rammed a pistol into its holster, leaped ahead and managed to catch the horse as it made for the trail.

Riding the sorrel to where he had left his own horse, Bob changed mounts. He led Peter's animal as he headed for the Lazy L. He had not been gone from the mesa more than fifteen minutes when two riders appeared on the trail from Mesa Prieta. Old Jurd Nason, weaving in his saddle

like some animated scarecrow, was in the lead. He was, therefore, the first to see the dead man beside the trail. With a flash of returning strength he stopped the horse he had hired in Mesa.

"Dios! What is it?" cried Rosita. She spurred to a point beside the emaciated old man who was to be her father-in-law.

"What is it?" Jurd snorted shrilly and savagely. "It's Pete, durn his ornery hide! He's done gone and got hisself killed!"

Slowly a tortured, terrified look came to the girl's face and it turned deathly pale.

"Madre de Dios!" she whispered, and her pretty brown hand made the sign of the cross on her breast. "Madre de Dios, help me!"

She suddenly seemed to awake to realization that she and her love still lived. She jumped from her saddle and ran towards the dead man.

Not so with old Jurd, however. After one sputtering, vituperative explosion towards his dead son, his savage heart quit, in fact his entire body ceased to live in that quarter-minute. He shortened, slipped to the right, and as if the tired horse would gently lay him down it sidled away, making startled and inquisitive noises through its nostrils.

Six-shooter across his legs and with rifle on the floor beside him, Joe Leighton sat in one of the chairs on his front porch. There was grim expectancy on his bearded face and in his sun-squinted eyes. He tensed and gripped the handle of the pistol as a rider came round cottonwoods and corral. When Leighton saw that this rider led a riderless horse he eased his grip on the handle of the Colt.

"Orton!" he muttered in combined disappointment and disgust. "I wondered where he'd hid himself."

Bob did not rein in until the forefeet of his own horse were within five feet of the porch. Leighton had now risen, and the Colt dangled in his right hand.

"Where'd you get that sorrel, Orton," he growled. "That's the same horse Peters rode away from here yesterday mornin'."

"Yeah," Bob agreed calmly. "Likely he won't be needin' it again, Mr. Leighton."

The rancher exploded like a wrathful volcano when he

understood what had been done. He jumped from the porch, snarled as he brandished the sixshooter.

"What'd you do that for, man? What you mean by hornin' in on my job? I didn't order you to ride up there and kill that man before I could get a crack at him! He wasn't out here to kill you, damn it! He was out here to kill me! This wasn't your play!"

Bob smiled coolly until he saw the rancher's wrath simmer to the point where he turned and dropped the pistol to the porch. As Leighton turned back he saw that Orton had dismounted.

"I'm sorry to have to disagree with you, sir," Bob said. "It was my game first, and when I start a game I like to finish it if I can."

For what seemed minutes Leighton stood swayed between wrath and reason. Then his eyes softened and he smiled doubtfully. He reached out a hand.

"Maybe you did right, Orton," he declared. "I might have murdered him the minute he came within range, I was that mad because he'd come out to kill me for somethin' I don't recollect ever doin'. You gave him a fair chance?"

"I gave him his chance. That's a lot more than he did for those men down south yesterday."

Leighton waited until he heard the brief account of the battle on the rim. Then he called to Chuck Ely who, still feigning illness, sat in the doorway of the bunk-house. Ely bow-legged it across the yard with surprising agility.

"Say, Chuck!" Leighton called. "I thought you were sick!"

"Aw, I been orful sick, Joe," the old cowboy grinned. "But I just got over 'er. It was one of them there miracles. What's happened, Orton?"

"It's all over, Chuck. If Mr. Leighton says so, you'd better get a couple of the boys and take what's left of Pete Nason to Mesa for burial."

"Wait! Wait!" Leighton cried as he jerked his head up. "What's this name you say, Orton? Nason?"

Bob explained that before he had left the rim he had searched the dead man's pockets.

"That name of Nathan Peters didn't sound just right for an outlaw," he declared. "I found enough to discover that his right name was Pete Nason."

For a minute Joe Leighton stood pondering. He nodded absently.

"Likely old Jurd's boy," he muttered to himself. "He had a boy Jurd and I had a little trouble a long time ago, but I hadn't given it a thought in ten years, it was that small" He roused from his abstraction, turned to the old cowboy "Yeah, Chuck, you get a couple of men and take the fellow to Mesa. See he gets decent burial, for if he was Jurd's boy I can't let him stay there for buzzard feed Do anything else you think money's needed for."

When Ely and two other riders reached the rim they found not one dead man but two, one snuffed from the virility of early manhood, the other looking, even in death, as if he had died years before A beautiful Mexican girl sat on the ground beside the body of the man she had loved. She stroked his black hair slowly. Her eyes were dry.

"You likely thought a heap of him," Ely guessed, speaking huskily.

Rosita Gonzales nodded, for she could not speak. Ely carefully lifted her to her feet and led her to where her horse stood. She remained beside it while Chuck and the other Lazy L men lashed Pete Nason and his father to the same pack saddle.

"By golly, the old hombre sure must've made a good load for one horse when he was the age of this one!" Ely declared when the grim work was finished.

"He sure must have been a giant of a man," agreed Ed Davis.

"He was the very strong hombre when he was the young," Rosita murmured. "For the long time he has been seeck."

Chuck let the other cowboys attend to the horse on which were the two dead men, father and son. He rode ahead with the sorrowful girl, and as the rough miles slipped by he managed to persuade her to talk a little.

"So you come all the way from Texas to marry him, eh?" Chuck queried.

"All the way from Tejas," she faltered, and her bosom heaved with a dry sob.

"Got the dinero to git back home, señorita?"

Rosita shook her beautiful head and her lips quivered.

"The dinero I have not, señor, but of no matter is that now."

"I'll see you git plenty dinero to travel home on," Chuck promised. "The boss tells me to spend dinero where it's needed. If that ain't bastante I'll throw in a little of my own."

Lida and her mother did not return home until sunset of the day following the end of Pete Nason's criminal career. Leighton met them as the buckboard stopped in front of the big ranch-house.

"We're glad to be back," Jane Leighton sighed, and smiled. "We left Manuela out of danger. She was very sick, Joe."

Lida jumped to the ground. She looked inquiringly at her father.

"How is everything, Dad?"

"I think," he answered after he had kissed her dusty cheek, "that everything is just about right, except that you and your mother look like you needed to change clothes, Lida."

"I don't care if I am dirty," Lida declared with a flash of eyes. "Manuela just couldn't have had that baby without Mother and me."

"Baby?" queried the rancher in simulated surprise.

"Yes, baby, of course!" cried the girl. "It's a boy, and her tenth, and she named it—what do you suppose?"

"Oh, Pedro or Pancho or Felipe or Diego. Nope, I reckon she's used up all those names already. Maybe Sebastiano."

"Wrong!" laughed Lida. "She named him José Leighton."

"But—but——" the suddenly puzzled and actually embarrassed rancher stammered.

"Because you have been so kind and generous to all of them, Joe," Mrs. Leighton explained as she found his hand. "She said to tell you she knew the baby would grow into one fine caballero because he bears your name."

"Such a gran' caballero!" Lida laughed as she tossed her auburn head. With a jaunty step she started towards the house, but stopped a foot after she had passed the doorway. Before her stood a man, a man carefully dressed

and unarmed. She felt her heart leap to her throat. The colour momentarily fled from her dusty face.

"Why—Bob Orton!" she faltered. "What are you doing here?"

"What do you think I am doing here, Lida?" He was smiling in that enigmatic way that had made her wonder whether he were making fun of her. Now she was sure he was not, and instead of flaring into anger she stood as if a little frightened and a little chastened, for when she tried to read his grey eyes she believed there was behind them a great deal he had not told her. She listened intently. Outside her father was speaking to her mother.

"You came back to tell me again that I have to marry you?" Lida demanded after she had gone a step nearer.

"No," he corrected. "I came back for you to tell me of your own accord. I made my play, Lida."

She seemed upon the point of angry explosion, but suddenly a tender smile came to her face. She lifted a right hand, slipped the buckskin gauntlet from it, and with the hand touched his cheek.

"I'm ready," she whispered as she lifted to her toes. "Oh, Bob, I was afraid you wouldn't come back!"

Oblivious to the fact that her father and mother were just outside, she wrapped her arms about his neck and he held her close.

"But who are you? What are you?" she queried later while her luminous eyes searched his.

"Why bother about that?" he drawled as he smiled down at her. "You'll have a long, long time to find out those things, Lida."

For another half-minute she tried to search his eyes, every line of his sun-browned face.

"You don't need to tell me unless you want to," she said with meekness that was strange to her. "All that matters to me is that you are you, and that you are here. Oh, I was so afraid you wouldn't come back!"

After discovering what was going on in the living-room, Leighton and his wife had hastily gone to the office at the corner of the big adobe.

"I'm glad she is at least grateful to him," Jane Leighton murmured.

"Grateful!" her husband laughed, and kept an arm

about her. "Say, she was head-over-heels in love with him from the start, Jane. That killer Peters? Say, she was just makin' a fool out of him. Don't you reckon I savvy my own daughter?"

Jane Leighton smiled into the face she knew so well. "Well, if you do, Joe," she said soberly, "you know more than I do. But I am sure this will turn out all right."

"It's already turned out that way," he corrected. "Let's go see what cock-and-bull story she has to tell us now, Jane."

"Yes!" she laughed a little shakily. "Let's go and see."

THE END